

WGUMC January 3, 2016 Epiphany of Fear or of Faith?  
Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples...

But into the darkness of a world at war, to peoples crouching in fear, comes...Star Wars, Episode VIII! Of course I saw the movie over Christmas. I bet you did, too. The Star Wars universe has universal appeal, because in that series, we get to know who the good guys and bad guys are and exactly where the light and darkness is.

But it's not so in our world, where we can find ourselves (in Syria, for example) fighting on both sides of the same war at once. O how we long for clear, clean lines between virtue and villainy, between absolute good and utter evil. That's why we will wait months and months and stand in long lines so that a Star Wars movie can shine like a sun into our land of shifting sand and shadows.

The new movie begins when the evil First Order is about to destroy the good Republic and the rebel forces they are secretly supporting. Forty years—a very Biblical number—have gone by since the end of the original series, and most everyone is convinced that the old religion is dead. The Jedi's are gone. The Force is forgotten. It was all just a myth.

That same sentiment may well be shared by many of the Israelites in our first reading this morning as they begin to return from exile in Babylonia. Their world is out of order and their God seems to be out to lunch. Nothing works anymore. The temple is in ruins, the economy is broken, so the strong prey on the weak and the desperate go after other gods.

Into that dark situation, Isaiah brings not a light saber but a light: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." He wants the returning exiles to know that the old religion is not dead. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is still very much alive. And this force doesn't

need to awaken because the God who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. [Psalm 121:4]

As we head into 2016, most of us would be glad for either a light saber or a light, anything to keep the dark side at bay. We could use some lessons in how to use the Force to combat all the fear that is out there. And to make matters worse, it would have to be an election year!

For months now, our presidential candidates have been trying to scare us into voting for them. They are stoking our fears of immigrants, refugees, terrorists, and lobbyists. But what kind of decisions do we make when we are motivated by fear?

Our Gospel reading in Matthew gives us a good idea of what a fear-based life looks like. Consider King Herod. When he heard that there was a child born to be king, he was gripped by fear—fear of losing his status, his power, his throne. Immediately, Herod demanded the facts: where's the Messiah

to be born? When did the star appear? People who are full of fear always want to be in command of the facts so they can manipulate them to their advantage. And they will do whatever it takes—use violent force if necessary—to convince themselves that they are still in control. When the magi didn't return to Herod, he ordered his soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem that were under the age of two.

But where does this fear-based life get you? Jesus says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it." [Matthew 16:25] Not long after the slaughter of the innocents, Herod himself died. The fear-based life sooner or later leads to death. We see it in Baghdad and in Baltimore, in Charleston and in Ferguson, in Syria and in San Bernardino.

But we see it much closer to our own homes, even inside them. How many of us have taken a job, not because we wanted it or because we were called to do it, but because we feared the financial repercussions if we didn't take it? How

many of us are stuck in those same jobs today? How many of us won't go to the doctor because we're afraid of what the doctor might say? How many of us are so afraid for our children and their future that we hover over them, never letting them fail; buy things for them, never letting them be disappointed; try to get them into the perfect school, enroll them in the best sports league, surround them with other kids just like them, never letting them get to know, let alone learn how to live with people who have a different skin color or speak a different language or come from a different social class? Wouldn't we all like our kids to go to Gunn High School in Palo Alto where 20 kids in the graduating class got into Stanford? While I was home in Colorado I read *The Atlantic* article about the academic pressure that has lead a few of those teens to jump in front of a train. As parents, we make fear-based decisions all the time and we have to ask ourselves, what truth are we missing? What damage are we doing?

Compare that to the faith-based life. The wise men saw the star rising in the east and were gripped not by fear, but by love. They left everything to follow the star, to find the new king, out of a love for knowledge and a search for truth. They didn't feel threatened by this impending shift in the balance of power. Nor did they need all the facts before they got started. They set out in faith, not knowing where they were going or when or how they would get there. They weren't upset that they found the king in a stable and not at Stanford.

In his fear, Herod planned how to harm the baby. In their faith, the magi were planning how to honor him. They brought gifts, not threats, and fell to their knees to give thanks to God. After being warned in a dream, they didn't return to the King of Fear. They went home by another road.

The turning of the year gives us a great opportunity to go home by another road. Today, let's make a resolution not to take the road of fear, not to make decisions based on fear, but

to be courageous and take the road of faith. Believe me, we will have many opportunities to put our resolve to the test in the next year.

Ever since things have been imploding in the Middle East, more and more people are expressing their fear of refugees, especially those coming from Syria. Acting a bit like King Herod, some governors in the U.S. have been trying to block them from settling in their states. Now I imagine that most of these governors are Christian. I would like to ask them, "Do you remember that Jesus was also a political refugee? Do you know the story about his escape into Egypt?" Mary and Joseph took him there until Herod was good and dead.

Canadians are not afraid. I heard they are knitting 25,000 warm hats for the refugees that they are taking in. I hope and pray that the huddled masses will find as warm a welcome here in our country.

It's hard to be faithful when politicians keep telling us to be fearful. And where does that fear lead? In the last few months, a brick was thrown through a window at a mosque in Alameda. "Jesus is the Way" was scrawled on a mosque in Hawthorne. A woman spewed hate and threw hot coffee at a Muslim man in Castro Valley. A man made a pipe bomb and then made threats against Muslims in Richmond. A mosque was firebombed in Tracy.

This darkness is coming too close to home. Where is the light? In the church, we are entering the season of Epiphany. The word means "manifestation," in this case, the manifestation of the Messiah—the Christ—not just to Jews, but to the whole world. As Isaiah says, "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn." [Isaiah 60:3] But what are Christians manifesting this year? Are we manifesting fear or faith?

This is a critical time for the followers of Jesus. We don't need the Force to awaken as much as we need to awaken. Christians need to be a force for good in this world or no one will ever see the good of Christ for the world. So whether we want to or not, we must take this journey, follow this star and find Jesus for ourselves. How else are we supposed to manifest him for the rest of the world?

United Methodists in Germany are embracing refugees from Syria. Gabi Eimer and her husband live in a small town in the Black Forest and are godparents for two Syrian refugee families. They are helping them learn German and shop for necessities while they wait to see if they will be granted asylum in that country. Gabi says, "The relationship is close and very good...I talk about my faith, and they talk about theirs. It's very good to know other cultures, how they live and think. I feel rich if I am learning something, and I am happy to be with them."

See more at: <http://www.umcmmission.org/learn-about-us/news-and-stories/2015/december/1218newreality#sthash.x91TXruR.dpuf>

For the next several weeks, we're going to be learning something about other cultures. We're going to be talking about Jesus and what he means to people of other faiths. Who is Christ for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and people of no religion at all? We might be surprised to find that the non-Christian world doesn't really have a problem with Jesus, only with some of his followers. Could their understanding of Jesus help us to manifest more of the Christ they are hoping to see?

The only Force we need is Faith. And 2016 could be the year that our fear is taken and our faith awakens and Christ's love for the world is made manifest through us. So "arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

