

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

MLK Sunday

Is. 49:1-7 Ps. 40 1 Cor. 1:1-9 John 1:29-42

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Jan. 18, 2026

People often send me things over the internet to read, for which I am grateful, even though I don't always have time to read everything thoroughly. This past week though, I received a sermon given by Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber on the Feast of the Epiphany... and I received it not just from one person, but from two... And whenever that happens, I feel like I have to pay closer attention to what's been sent to me, lest I miss something the cosmos really wants me to see or know...

Truth is, I'm very glad I did pay close attention to Nadia's sermon, because in it she offered an image to hold onto as we hear the cry of the prophet Isaiah echo throughout the Epiphany season proclaiming, "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you..."

Nadia acknowledging in her sermon how ludicrous and impossible that proclamation to "rise and shine" must have sounded to the people who first heard it as they stood in the rubble of Jerusalem in the aftermath of Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE... And how ludicrous and impossible it may sound to us in the violence, the

vindictiveness and the vitriol of our time... “Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...”

It is in the challenge and near impossibility of such a call to “rise and shine” that Nadia then offers an image I have never before heard referenced in Biblical commentaries, or seminary lectures or sermons...

That image being “phosphorescence”... which, if you look the word up in Wikipedia, will discover it to be “a process in which energy absorbed by a substance is released relatively slowly in the form of light”... “a process in which energy absorbed by a substance is released relatively slowly in the form of light.”

Which is how stars like this work (*a little show and tell*); a number of which my grandson August had his father stick to his bedroom ceiling when Augie was five was so they would glow in the dark after having absorbed energy from the sun during the day...

(When I was a child I had a small cross that worked in the same way, and I remember looking at it occasionally during the night as it lay glowing on my bedside table after a day in the sun... That cross giving me the assurance of Jesus’ presence in the dark...)

Nadia Bolz-Weber’s reason for using “phosphorescence” as the central image in her Epiphany sermon being the relationship between the absorption of energy by a star or a cross or whatever, and the slow, steady emission of light that results from that absorption... A light dependent upon its source for “taking in” before it can “go out” to shine or glow or light the way ahead...

Nadia then suggesting (and I love this), that it was phosphorescent light that led the Wisemen home after their time with the Christ child in the stable... Because of course, as Nadia said, the star had done its job of leading them to the manger, but the star was long gone by the time they were ready to head back home...

And, as the story tells us, the Wisemen needed to go home by a different way in the first act of resistance against Herod and his Empire after Jesus' birth... A way home they didn't know, but which they had to take in order to defy Herod's order that they tell him where the babe born King of the Jews was staying...

So, suggested Nadia Bolz-Weber, absent the star, the Wisemen used the energy (or light) they had absorbed in Jesus' presence to lead them home... phosphorescent light... light dependent upon a source of energy absorbed or taken in before it can shine... not a bright light perhaps... or flashy or dazzling... maybe even a bit slow and quiet and muted, but enough light to take those Wisemen home by another road...

As I thought about this image offered by Nadia for our consideration during all the Sundays of Epiphany, it occurred to me that this image of phosphorescence also runs through our Gospel text for this morning as John the Baptist, having absorbed the light of Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River, was given the insight and the voice to proclaim, "Look! Here is the Lamb of God!" as Jesus walked by some days later... John the Baptist shining with the phosphorescent light he had absorbed from Jesus at Jesus' baptism...

And Jesus, having absorbed the Spirit and light of God in his baptism, was the phosphorescent light that caused the first disciples (before they were disciples) to follow Jesus at his invitation to “come and see”, and then to spend the day with him, absorbing the light Jesus had absorbed from God... which in turn gave the first disciples the phosphorescent light they needed to go out into the world calling others to “come and see”....

Reminding me of the story theologian David Miller tells in his book “Blue Like Jazz,” in which he admits that he never liked jazz until one evening outside the Bagdad Theater in Portland, Oregon when he saw a man playing the saxophone. As David Miller writes of the experience, “I stood there for fifteen minutes, and he never opened his eyes. After that I liked jazz music... Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It’s as if they are showing you the way.”

I find Nadia Bolz-Weber’s description of Epiphany light as being “phosphorescent” to be so helpful... In part because I’m not sure I could muster a glimmer of light on my own at this present moment... And so the possibility of absorbing light that is proximate, near and here, as our faith assures us is true, offers me some hope as I wonder how in the world I might share the light of Christ in the darkness of these days...

And in part because the image of Epiphany light being “phosphorescent” reminds me that sometimes you have to watch someone love something before you can learn to love it yourself... Or, in the language of our Christian story, sometimes you have to park

yourself in the presence of Jesus, looking at what he loved, what he did, how he responded to the needs of those around him, how he responded to those who sought to silence him, how he bore the light of God's love to the world even in the midst of persecution...

Sometimes you have to park yourself in the presence of Jesus to see how and who and what he loved in order to learn to love those things yourself... The way of Jesus, the light of Jesus, proximate, near, here, free for the taking in, the absorbing... phosphorescent light to bear to the world... maybe not dazzling and bright ... maybe even a bit slow and quiet and muted, but enough light to invite others to "come and see"... enough light, in the midst of tyrants scheming and screaming, to help ourselves and others to go home by another road...

Which is why perhaps, the first four commandments in the "10 Commandments of the Christian Nonviolent Movement" practiced by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights workers were these:

- 1) *Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.*
- 2) *Remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation; not victory.*
- 3) *Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.*
- 4) *Pray daily to be used by God in order that all humanity might be free...*
- Just to repeat the first commandment again: 1) *Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.*

And it is why, perhaps, MLK was fond of saying about his daily schedule, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”

Sometimes you have to watch someone love something before you can learn to love it yourself... It’s as if they’re showing you the way...

It was phosphorescent light that MLK and Howard Thurman and John Lewis and Fannie Lou Hamer and hundreds of other civil rights workers brought to our country in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s... Phosphorescent light they had absorbed from Jesus as they prayed and sang spirituals and studied the nonviolent way of Jesus together... Light they carried with them as they marched and boycotted and responded to water hoses and beatings and jail time and hatred, responding with wills of steel and hearts of love... Calling anyone who wanted to follow in the way of Jesus to “come and see”...

And it is why we, as Christians in the crises of our own time, are so fortunate that we can absorb the light of Jesus from those who have gone before us, and in the midst of our own tyrant’s scheming and screaming, can help ourselves and others go home by another road...

Tomorrow evening Bishop Brown is meeting over Zoom with all the priests in the Diocese of Maine who are presently serving congregations to talk to us about how we might walk with and support our immigrant neighbors and people of color as ICE agents threaten the safety and stability of our communities...

The Episcopal Churches in Lewiston, Auburn and Portland have long been advocates and safe havens for folks newly arrived in Maine from many different countries, and it is these congregations that are facing the most immediate danger... But there are five vans of ICE agents in Bangor as of two days ago, and so I am very interested to know what guidance and suggestions Bishop Brown might have for us in the days to come...

The Bishop in the Diocese of New Hampshire, the Reverend Rob Hirshfield, has told the priests in his diocese to get their papers in order, to make sure their wills are up-to-date, and to get out into the streets with their bodies...

These are frightening times. And we don't know what will be asked of us in the days and weeks and months to come. But on this weekend when we give thanks for the work and witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of others who have carried the phosphorescent light of Jesus into the hatred, the violence and the injustice of this world, I find that while I'm grateful for the actions they took, and the speeches they gave, and the examples they set, I am even more grateful that they showed me what they loved... Because sometimes you have to watch someone love something before you can learn to love it yourself...

And what they showed me they loved was Jesus... Jesus, and the way he insisted that **“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.”**... What they showed me is that loving Jesus means meditating on his teachings and his life... And even on a busy day, spending the first three hours in prayer... (which, by the way, I can't even begin to imagine)...

What they showed me is the power of phosphorescent light... Light absorbed from Jesus, the light of the world, and then carried into the suffering of our own day... maybe not in a way that's dazzling and bright ... maybe even in a way that's a bit slow and quiet and muted, but strong enough to invite others to "come and see" ... strong enough, in the midst of our own tyrant's scheming and screaming, to help ourselves and others to go home by another road...

These are frightening times. And we don't know yet what we may be asked to do in the days and weeks and months to come... Which is why I can think of no better words to leave you with than those with which Nadia Bolz-Weber ended her sermon on Epiphany Sunday... She said this...

"If you too don't feel particularly radiant right now... and you are convinced you cannot possibly rub two sticks together to somehow create a spark, just know this:

"Maybe you don't have to. In fact, I wonder if manufacturing our own brightness can obscure a gentler light that God has provided for the path ahead.

"And so when things get dark – and they will – the light of God's word shines enough to be a lamp unto our feet. Stumbling, maybe. Dancing, sometimes. But always the next step it lit. Not because you have made yourself dazzling. But because the light has already found you.

"And no. I still do not know what the future holds.

“All I know is that in Christ, in prayer, in word, in sacrament, we have quietly, unsuspectingly been absorbing everything we need to phosphorescently light the path before us wherever that leads...”

“Because the light of Christ does not vanish when the world gets dark. It lingers. It lingers in those of us who have sat in the presence of forgiveness – and thought nothing was happening...”

“It lingers in the children in the pews who seem distracted by coloring, but who are absorbing Scripture without realizing it...”

“It lingers in all who have heard that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

“And then one day-

When the power fails,

When the star disappears,

When certainty collapses –

“there you are. Glowing just a bit.

“Not because you are shining with your own goodness or faith. But because you were once close enough to the Light of the world that it soaked into you. And that kind of light has a way of leading people by another road.”

As I look out upon all of you this morning I see the phosphorescent light of Jesus shining in each of you... May we take this light into these times in which we find ourselves in ways that invite others to “come and see” ... And may we do so as if the world depended

upon it... Because, as Jesus and MLK and John Lewis and Fannie Lou Hamer would tell us, it does...