

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

The light of the Star

Epiphany is one of my favourite celebrations. For me the symbolism of it is right up there with Christmas. In my home I simply can't take down my decorations until I have celebrated Epiphany. (I guess I know what I'm doing this afternoon). Most probably don't even know Epiphany is coming and for many it is just another day, another story. For most the wise ones have already come and you wonder why the sanctuary still has all the decorations in it. January 6th is actually epiphany so we are celebrating a day early but I thought it would be hard to drag everyone back in tomorrow for a celebration of light (especially seeing most of us are back to 'the grind of school and work full swing tomorrow).

Many of us have come to love the Christmas star so much. Even in the weeks before Christmas, you start seeing it everywhere. It's on bulletin covers and Christmas cards and you see the stars adorning our stage here. As we have celebrating heaven and nature singing for the last several weeks more and more stars appeared until we had the image on Christmas night of the night sky filling this place. Stars are a part of the season. We hold the story of the star so closely that we often put it on top of the tree.

Why do I enjoy this part of the story where they follow the star so very much? Perhaps it is because it speaks to where we are in our season and in our culture. In the Northern Hemisphere, we are experiencing the darkness of midwinter. Days are short and nights long. This year so far we haven't even had the beauty of a snowy ground to light the way. Its been dreary and raining and dark for awhile now. But more than the weather there are other forms of darkness—depression, anxiety, poverty, war, injustice, oppression, hatred, prejudice, fear—forms that also affect us just as they did the people of biblical times. In these passages, light breaks through the darkness: a prophet calls us to arise and see the light of liberation and peace, reconciliation and joy; if we were to have read all the lectionary scriptures you would have heard the psalmist pray for a ruler who will light the way of his people with righteousness, prosperity, and an end to oppression and injustice. The writer of Ephesians lights the way through mystery, with a message of the good news of Christ Jesus; and the Magi follow the light of a star, finding more than they were looking for, to return home transformed.

It's that last part that gets me. The point of following the star was not to just go out on a trek as a tourist it was to encounter a light that transforms our lives. One of the great things about having young ones around in the Christmas season is that it brings us back to the excitement of it all. When children first see a Christmas tree in their home they are usually amazed by its sparkle and

beauty. In the eyes of a young child, we see the wonder, curiosity, and joy that the lights bring. We all sometimes need to be reminded that we are God's children who need to come to the "light" as well. "Just as Jerusalem was to be the light on a hill for all nations to see God's glory, we need to come toward this "light" so that we too may be transformed by life in God's presence. This life in the presence of God should be one of wonder, curiosity, and joy, like that of a young child. By acknowledging and being transformed by the "light," we too can participate in God's kingdom. The essence of the passage is reflected in the hymn Arise, Your Light Is Come by Ruth Duck: "Show forth the glory of your God/Which shines on you today."¹

Isaiah 60:1-6 feels a little like "So rise and shine and give God the glory glory..." But the vision is higher, downright cosmic in scope. God's reclamation of creation isn't me feeling better or the saving of souls. It's the redemption of the created order — and it is God's act, illustrated well by the common distinction (Christopher Lasch, Martin Luther King, Jr.) between optimism and hope. Optimism is the sunny dream that tomorrow will be better, and it's up to us to make it so. Hope can hold it together even if tomorrow is worse; hope trusts in the larger, longer future, and it's up to God, not us. Our task is, as our text puts it, to "stand." Just as we have done in joy throughout our series. This standing in the soul is all about dignity, readiness, an eagerness to see and be ready to move.

We stand as we prepare ourselves to leave worship weekly. In Oscar Romero's words, "When we leave Mass, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mt. Sinai: with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong to face the world's difficulties." Stand, be prepared, follow and live in the light. In **Matthew 2:1-12**. The magi arrive. Not as in "wise men still follow him," but astrologers, an art, an alchemy condemned in Judaism and Christianity! Yet, so eager is the Christchild to be found, and by everybody, even these deluded ones find their way to Bethlehem, the Scripture-is-Clear!²

Transformation, healing and new life is what coming to the stable in Bethlehem is all about. The magi that took this journey must have known that otherwise why would they have gone to such effort risking their lives to greet this child? Perhaps it was also part of their mission, their life call to take these sacred, priceless gifts to this child. Gifts fit for a king.

We can all understand bringing Gold - that is still prevalent enough in our culture that we understand bringing it to any birth if you could. Frankincense and Myrrh however? For all I knew is these were lovely perfumes one for the rich to fill their rooms warm aroma during life and myrrh used as a fragrance in burial. There is so much more to them however. Why Frankincense? Frankincense for some religions, is correlated with one of the most prized possessions of ancient biblical times... Frankincense was also used during religious ceremonies for salves for soothing skin and perfume. The perfume or aroma that Frankincense emits promotes feelings of satisfaction, peace, relaxation, and overall wellness, which explains its

¹ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/2141/epiphany-of-the-lord>

² <https://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/10000/weekly-preaching-epiphany-2020>

unique value in ancient times... With its strong aromatic properties, Frankincense is for healing, cell rejuvenation, and uplifting offering hope and joy. a positive and focused lift to the rest of your day.

And then there was Myrrh. "Ancient records show that Myrrh was deemed so valuable that at times it was valued at its weight in gold. Myrrh is in the Bible as the Balm of Gilead, Myrrh has been used throughout history as a perfume and incense. It was also employed in embalming and religious ceremonies.

Emotionally Myrrh is known as The Oil of Mother Earth.

Myrrh oil nurtures the soul's relationship with its maternal mother and with the earth. Myrrh offers Positive Properties like Feeling safe in the world, healthy attachments, trusting the goodness of life, bonded, maternal connection, nurtured and loved.

Gifts fit for a king not just because of their monetary worth but because they are thought to have life-giving, healing, holistic properties that assist in well-being, fullness of life, awareness, trust, bring connection with the earth and one another. I imagine Jesus used some of these gifts in his spiritual journey and healing practices. It just makes sense. These gifts are also symbols of what Jesus desires for each of us. Wholeness, healing, trust, awareness, well-being.

In seeing the star our story tells us there were two reactions. Herod became very afraid and the magi were transformed. Both reactions were appropriate. If the constellations were changing at the birth of this child what do we have control of anymore? When we hear that Herod was frightened, "and all Jerusalem with him," it makes sense. Because when the heavens themselves begin to defy prediction, there is no telling what might happen. Who knows, what other constellations might collapse--constellations of power, constellations of privilege, constellations of the possible and the impossible, of what we can imagine and what we've come to expect? "If all that collapses, where will that leave us? Who among us can say for sure that it will be better? If everything changes, how will we know what to do? "For behold," it says in scripture, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth..." "Behold, I am doing a new thing..." "Therefore, if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2 Co 5:17) So much of our God-talk points to the renovating power of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. But is that really what we're seeking?

Sometimes when we speak of the new, I think what we mostly mean is something more along the lines, not of "new," but more like "improved." The fact is, much of the time, even faithful people can't imagine a world that is much different from the one that we already have. As long as we remain in control, it may still be hard but I've got it in my hands.

And that's the whole point of this story, this life, this scripture. We can't transform life. But God can. And God is longing to show us that vision, which is a vision for all Creation, and all time.

As we begin another year there is something so lovely, even holy, about naming our hopes for our lives, even when they are small hopes.

There is a lot of negative talk about resolutions and I get that but on December 31st this year I found myself sitting down to journal so thoughts, goals, desires. I shared them with Macky and I intend to work on them to spend time in the holy practice of transformation.

I don't know about you, but I've seen people quit smoking on the strength of a New Year's resolution. I've seen someone go from sitting on their couch to running a half-marathon on the strength of a New Year's resolution. I've seen someone finish a long-abandoned degree on the strength of a New Year's resolution.

These are all brave and holy acts, in their way. But, fundamentally, what makes them holy is that each one is not an end in itself, but rather, a new beginning.

These steps toward a different future may be small, they may be incremental, but they are not shallow, because they are the first steps toward the new--the first steps toward a future that the dreamer can't quite see, but which the dreamer faithfully pursues, just the same.

Let's also not forget that they require tremendous trust--trust that the strength to see them through is there to be found, trust that it will get easier, trust that setbacks aren't the end if we don't let them be.

Learning that kind of trust can mean nothing short of learning to see the world and ourselves in a whole new way. Sometimes, it's nothing short of learning to live in the light of a new star.”³

Honestly that is my hope for this congregation and church system this year. A transformation of hope, and trust.

“When Herod saw that star, all he could manage to see was bad news. But the point is that it's good news. So, as a new year begins, as we move from a season of taking stock and move into a season of taking action, we are invited--you and I--to push beyond all the old rules and all the expectations of what can and can't be, what should and should not be.

We're invited to acknowledge our fears; and indeed, it's important that we do--but we're invited even more urgently to push past them and to imagine what it might mean to live in the light of that new star.

For the brokenhearted and the broken down--for all the ways that brokenness in all its forms can shrink our world until it has no room for anything but pain and worry--the light of that new star reveals a path, a path back to the world.

For the victims of injustice and oppression, the victims of those subtle and the not-so-subtle exclusions that some know all too well and others seem as if they cannot see at all, the light of that new star is a reminder, that change is possible.

For those who are afraid to attempt new things--too afraid of who might see, too afraid of who might laugh, too afraid of the smirk and the diminishing comment or the raised eyebrow, the light of that star reveals a gallery of other faces, eager to cheer, eager to help, and eager to undertake the journey, too.

Whatever our fears may be, Epiphany reminds us that we can live our lives in a new light.

Epiphany reminds us that Jesus, the light of the world, has arrived in all his rule-breaking, table-turning glory, helping us to see all things, and even ourselves, in new ways.

"Take heart," Jesus says, "It is I; have no fear."

³ emitted from http://day1.org/6318-the_troubling_star

May you and I always seek to live in the light of that promise.
Amen.”⁴

⁴ http://day1.org/6318-the_troubling_star