

Arise, Our Light Has Come!
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany Sunday; 5 January 2020

Texts

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

Happy New Year to you all! We are stepping into a new year and the beginning of a new decade. There is a Korean saying when the first button is well done up the next will be easy. Like the English phrase, "getting off on the right foot," a good beginning promises a good year ahead of us. Best wishes to all of us at West Point Grey United as we venture into this new year.

Our 12 days of celebration ends tomorrow with the feast of Epiphany, January 6. In many parts of the world, Epiphany is the beginning of Christmas celebrations. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanksgiving on continuing their journey to Bethlehem.

While we begin to pack our Christmas ornaments and decorations away, for many other Christians the ritual of Christmas or the feast of the Epiphany has just begun.

What is the important in the story of what happened after Christmas Day that brings Christians to celebrate the season of Epiphany? How do we carry the spirit of Christmas into this brand-new year 2020?

The notion of wise travelers from the East coming to Jerusalem does not appear for the first time in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew is not the first one to imagine the visit of *magi*, but the prophet of Isaiah. Isaiah says, “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord” (60:6). Isaiah dreamed and hoped for renewal of the faith of the people so that the city would flourish and everything be changed for good.

However, Isaiah’s situation was not an optimistic one. The people of Israel had been sent from Jerusalem to Iraq in 580 BCE and lived in exile for a couple of generations. When they returned home, they saw the destroyed city of Jerusalem and that there was no sign of a viable economy and not much ground for new possibilities. In the middle of that mess in Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah proclaims that everything will change in Jerusalem because God is about to do good: “Arise, shine; for your light has come ... the Lord has risen upon you, his glory will appear over you” (60:1-2). Further, the prophet says, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn ... the wealth of the nations shall come to you” (60:3,5).

How can this be possible? The prophet imagines that there will be great camel caravans coming from Asia loaded with commercial goods such as “gold and frankincense” and rare spices. Isaiah assures the day is coming when the city of Jerusalem works harmoniously in peace and prosperity. Even though this situation is not that great, Isaiah imagines, hopes and promises God’s help: the day is coming. Arise and shine, for your light has come.

About 500 years later Matthew applies Isaiah’s vision to his community and context saying: “Wise men from the East ... offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (2:1,11). We may be surprised to see how similar the two texts, Isaiah and Matthew, are in that the people from the East or wise ones will bring good things.

Matthew, however, does not agree with Isaiah’s vision: the shining, flourishing place would not be the city of Jerusalem but the little village of Bethlehem. Then Matthew switches his text from Isaiah to the rural peasant prophet Micah to present the story of Epiphany. Therefore, the magi failed to find the baby Jesus in Jerusalem; they had to go to a little rural place, dusty, unknown, unnoticed, unpretentious place, a little village of Bethlehem.

So, Matthew says, from the prophet Micah, “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6; Micah 5:2).

Matthew envisions the birthing place is not the city of Jerusalem where the ruling class lives but the little village of Bethlehem where peasant, ordinary people live. Even though the wise ones’

thought reflects the conventional wisdom of the day that the birthing place of a king would be the city with its high towers and great arenas, banks and great urban achievements, it is not the case. Jesus is born in a smelly barn, in an unimaginable place. So the wise ones were not so wise; they had to go to another place, a small, unknown village: an ordinary place. On hearing the message, they quickly changed their direction and did not follow the orders from Herod: in that sense they were wise. They did not hesitate to go the extra miles to visit the Christ child. They were not tricked into going to a vulnerable place, a place without security. And after visiting the newborn baby, they went home by another road.

Where are we looking for God in this brand-new year? If we look for God in the wrong place, we need, like the wise ones, to change our direction. As we hear from the story of Matthew, God has come in the seemingly powerless form of an infant, not in a warm home but in a cold barn, not in a well-equipped hospital bed but in a manger, not in the city of Jerusalem but the unknown village of Bethlehem. God is there in an unknown place; God is here in our ordinary place.

In this season of Epiphany God's light has come to every and all places. The important thing is that the light has come as a powerless baby in a lowly place. It means that we see the divine presence, God's light is everywhere and in all people. Everything and everyone in the universe shines because God is in them (John 1:14). So, this is our Christmas story; this is our epiphany story. Our story invites us to open our eyes to the light that is everywhere and in every person. God is with us.

There in all beings is the light. Maybe perhaps sometimes the light is deeply hidden in confusions or falseness. But it is here, waiting to come forth anew. As we are embarking on our faith journey towards God in this new year, let us remember the story of the magi becoming vulnerable for justice, going extra miles for righteousness and changing their direction for life. These Christmas and Epiphany stories are now ours. In Jesus we have experienced the light of life. So now let us "arise, shine; our light has come." We are invited to the table of Jesus. Come, come to the table. Amen.

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