

“Your Light Has Come”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Epiphany - January 2, 2022
The Rev. Dr. Sandy Selby
Matthew 2:1-12

As we begin a new year, it’s appropriate to look back to another beginning:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Gen. 1:1-5).

According to the first chapter of Genesis, that’s how it all began. Before there was light, there was the chaos of a formless void, with darkness covering the earth. Then God called forth light, and the world burst forth into creation. Using language that recalls the first day of Creation, the 60th chapter of Isaiah, a portion of which we read together as our Call to Worship, envisions a new creation for the people of Jerusalem after decades of exile in Babylon,

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.

The interplay of darkness and light is a common theme in both the Old and New Testaments, with darkness signifying chaos, sin, and death, and light signifying hope, well being, and salvation. Isaiah’s vision of salvation includes a pilgrimage of the nations, who will come to Israel’s light to worship the God of Israel. The magi, the Gentiles that follow the star to Bethlehem in today’s gospel lesson, are living out the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. An “epiphany” is an experience of sudden awareness, the dawning of a realization about the essential nature, or meaning, of something. On Epiphany we celebrate that the wise men who saw a star at its rising believed that star was linked to an ancient prophecy. They started on a journey, searched for the child who was foretold by that prophecy, and by the guidance of the star ultimately found him. There, they experienced an epiphany, the extraordinary found in the ordinary, an awareness that this child who was living in the most simple of circumstances would indeed become “the ruler who is to shepherd the people Israel.” Epiphanies are transformative; the wise men were transformed by the appearance of the star and the scene to which it led them. They knelt before this infant king who was living in poverty, and gave him extravagant gifts. All of this happened

because seeing that star gave them hope, stirring them to begin a long, difficult, and dangerous journey.

We celebrate Epiphany as a particular day on which we read a particular story from Matthew's gospel, but Epiphany is more than a feast day on which we celebrate something that happened in the past. It is for us, today, as one commentator has said, "a way of being a pilgrim people entrusted with a divine gift for the life of the world."¹ That "divine gift" that we bring to the world is the gift of Christ who was revealed to the magi in Bethlehem and is revealed to us as the Christ who is present with us, today, offering hope, love, justice, and peace. To a world that in many ways still lives in darkness, we are called to bring the divine gift of the light of Christ. As Jesus said to the multitudes in his Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

We are reminded this week of our urgent need to let the light of Christ shine because last year, on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, our nation was plunged into the darkness of the violent insurrection at the Capitol Building in Washington. The "epiphany" that we experienced on January 6, 2021 was a realization of the extent of the rage, hatred, and disdain for our democracy that exists in our country—a challenge and a threat that continues, today.

Such darkness in the halls of political power was also at work around the wise men who followed the star to Jerusalem. Herod, who felt threatened by the prophecy of a child who would be king of the Jews, tried to trick the wise men into telling him where the child was so that he could, he said, "go and pay him homage." Then, just as God had intervened by sending the rising star that showed the way to the infant Jesus, God again intervened by warning the wise men, in a dream, not to return to Herod. So, Matthew says, "they left for their own country by another road."

Matthew tells us that "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men" (Mt 2:16). Jesus escaped this fate because an angel of the Lord had appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him that Herod was about to search for the child and destroy him, and to go to Egypt and wait there until Herod died (Mt 2:13-14). As Herod shows us, for those who live within the darkness of narcissism, any perceived threat can have deadly, and tragic, consequences.

But God says, "Let there be light!" John begins his gospel by talking about the Word, Jesus, who was with God from the dawning of the first day. John writes, "What has come into being in [Christ]—was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to be light-bearers for Christ, so that this world will not be overcome by the darkness that surrounds us.

There is urgency for Christians of goodwill to reclaim the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, as the day on which the light of Christ shines forth to all the nations in love, compassion, and peace, so that January 6 is not forever remembered—and by some celebrated—as a festival of hatred, cynicism, and violence. Like the wise men, we people of goodwill are guided by the light of Christ, going forth on a journey that will bring the light of Christ to the darkness of this

¹Daniel Harris and Colleen Mary Mallon, 'Epiphany of the Lord,' Paul Scott Wilson, ed, *Abingdon Theological Companion to the Lectionary, Preaching Year C* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 33.

world. As Jesus said in John's gospel, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

I invite you, now, to go with me on a journey of the imagination, as you envision your own journey as a light-bearer for Christ. Like the wise men, our journey will have a starting point, a search, a journey, and transformation. You may close your eyes and visualize this journey, or jot down your thoughts along the way—whatever speaks to you as you imagine the way forward as Christ's light-bearer to the world around you.

The starting point

For the wise men, the starting point in today's story was a star that prophesied the birth of a child born to be king. The star got their attention. What gets your attention, today? For what do you yearn?

The search

For the wise men, the prophecy of the birth of the child who would be king brought hope, and mobilized them to set out on a journey through the wilderness. What is your hope, today, in this New Year, on this day of Epiphany, that beckons you to move forth on your journey? For whom, or for what, are you searching?

The journey

The wise men knew the general direction they wished to travel, and as astrologers they knew the constellations that served as their guides. But the journey was long, and in some places dangerous. What are the dangers of your journey? What will help you find the way? Who will support you? Who accompanies you? What will sustain you?

Transformation

The wise men came to Jerusalem; there they met with Herod, who wanted to know the location of the child who was born to be king. When they left Herod, they saw again the star they had seen at its rising, followed that star, and were transformed, overwhelmed with joy, by what they found in the modest house to which the star led them. What will it be like when you reach the end of your journey, and find that for which you hope? How will you, and the world, be transformed?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are light-bearers. Wherever our journey of imagination may take us, may we not begin this year, may we not approach this coming Thursday, January 6, as a time of dread, reliving with despair the trauma of last year. Rather, may this be for all of us a time of hope in which we know that the Christ child who appeared to the wise men is among us still, and that the peace, compassion, justice, and love for which Jesus was born, and for which he died, will always have the last word. As light-bearers let us, as the Rev. Janet Hunt says, "keep listening to our dreams," and "keep our eyes and our hearts peeled for signs of hope, and then follow where it leads."²

I share with you now a poem written by Andrew King, describing this journey on which we embark, together, on this Feast of the Epiphany, in this New Year of possibilities and promise:

² Janet Hunt, www.dancingwiththeword.com, 2019, accessed 12/21/21

THE STAR SIGNAL - by Andrew King
(Matthew 2: 1-12)

Not every journey toward the Christ
starts like the magi's in darkness,
but there might come
a time when, in the empty hours
of an otherwise unremarkable night,
you have happened to look up at the usual sky,
and noticed, almost by accident, between
passages of gray beasts of slow-moving cloud
the bright bloom of a strange star flowering,
and something begins to open a little
somewhere beneath your skin,
as if that new wedge of light in the sky
had inserted itself into your soul,
not enough to cause you any hurt, but just
enough that you feel a pang, the twinge
of something like longing, as if your eyes
in the silence have become ears
in the darkness, and you are hearing
a holy summons,
distant but ringing like a silver trumpet
in the chambers of your listening heart,
and you gaze at that star where it stands
in the sky dropping dust on the night horizon,
and you think it might be signaling
a holy Presence in the world
and a road you can take to meet it,
and that such a road, lit with such promise,
might lead to a great adventure,
where life becomes challenged
and changed and as new as the sky
above a better world.
And so you pack, and you leave
on this journey, this journey
where Christ is not only waiting
but walking your road at your side,
and you follow that light
as it closes the distance,
as it reaches deep within you,

touching gifts
you carry in your hand.³

³ Andrew King 12/28/2014 “A Poetic Kind of Place”
<https://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2014/12/28/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-sunday-of-the-epiphany-yr-b/>, accessed 12/21/21