

Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
January 6, 2019

Matthew 2:1-12 / Isaiah 60: 1-6

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

### **The Sacred Throng**

Epiphany brings up for us the image of wise men making their way to the newborn Jesus by following a star, the story told to us in Matthews gospel.

Epiphany means "illuminated" or "revealed" and after a dark rainy day like yesterday (How much more gloomy can you get than that??) we are happy to rest here, to wonder here, to reflect here together on anything that has to do certainly with light and even more so lightness of being.

Today we veer from Matthew to Isaiah, the prophet who long before Jesus came saw hope in the midst of a difficult time. As we explore the prophets words, his vision I hope we will come to see Epiphany as being about more than kings and the gifts they bring.

To enter Isaiah's world I'd ask you to imagine yourself waking up in a strange house, a place where you do not know the layout of the rooms. You wipe the sleep from your eyes and try to make your way through dark rooms, rooms which seem to have no outside or inside source of light. You trip a few times on thresholds and on furniture that is in your way. It's a bit scary the way you are feeling around in the dark, trying to find an exit, feeling walls and furniture and doorways...when suddenly you turn a corner, and in that room there is at last a window, a window thru which a full moon shines, illuminating everything around you. Suddenly you can see – not only the room, but a door thru which you can exit this place of darkness.

The people of Isaiah's time were in exile. They had been taken from the place they called home. They sought a way out of a time that felt dark and alienating and confusing. Their ways looked odd to their captors, and their captors ways odd to them. But the prophet speaks to their situation, that it is not always going to be like this.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates this passage:

*"Get out of bed, Jerusalem! Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight. God's bright glory has risen for you. The whole earth is wrapped in darkness, all people sunk in deep darkness, But God rises on you, his sunrise glory breaks over you.*

Epiphany makes us pause and consider the illuminating and healing power of light – God's light – and how so often we experience this in personal ways.

A mother, fearful for her daughter, enters her daughters bedroom, staring at the empty room. All she feels is worry, anxiety...she does not know where her daughter is, But knows her daughter is caught up in some dangerous things. Her eyes catch on the teenager version of the bible that someone has given this beloved child of hers. She picks the bible up, and into the dark hours of the night, she reads it. It not only gets her through the night but puts her on a path. And everything changes from that moment on.

A husband, angry and distraught, walks through a park. He is trying to come to terms with a marriage that has ended and All he feels is anger. How can one person pulling out put so many lives in chaos? They have children who are still young. This was not what he wanted, but it only takes one to end things. The husband bellows at the skies, and curses his wife. A second walk, days later, he stops at a bridge over a brook. Looking down at the water below, he feels something change. He says a prayer for his soon to be ex-wife's wellbeing. He prays that God, who cares for us all, will care for her. He holds her up into the light, and his soul settles a bit.

A young person, a "millennial" comes into a church. She is pretty sure churches are... well, quaint. Pretty sure all they talk about it the past. Pretty sure she won't find a lot to go by here, but People warmly greet here before the service begins, and the

pastor says “whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, You are welcome here” looking at her. There is a peace she feels when the choir sings, and when the people pray. There seems to be more honesty, more liveliness, more acceptance of difference than she’s ever found before. And it feels less that she’s found something as that something has *found her*.

In that church too there is a teenager. A teenager who is pretty sure middle school and now high school are the hardest parts of anyone’s life. This teenager is dragged, yes often dragged to church. But people there know her. They see her, see things she is good at. They ask her questions about her life. They make her think maybe it is going to get better, maybe even a little easier, on down the road. She leaves church some mornings realizing her heart feels lighter, like something weighing her down has been lifted.

Epiphany light is bright light, light that seeks out the lost and lonely, light that can heal, light that can change things. The image in Isaiah is of people who felt cut off, stuck, adrift finding their way -- or even better, *being sought and found and brought back together again by God’s healing light* it is a beautiful image of people brought together from all corners of the earth to be gathered as one, together in that light.

Again, from Eugene Peterson’s translation:

*Nations will come to your light, kings to your sunburst brightness. Look up! Look around! Watch as they gather, watch as they approach you: Your sons coming from great distances, your daughters carried by their nannies. When you see them coming you’ll smile—big smiles! Your heart will swell and, yes, burst! All those people returning by sea for the reunion, a rich harvest of exiles gathered in from the nations!*

The people hearing this passage were led to imagine themselves in a large procession, a great mass of humanity. It was not a man-made crowd, but one God had called together and the imagery of all these separated people coming together would have made the people living in a strange land weep with joy. Isaiah’s vision is meant to shape our life together, right here in this place. Where the world out there seeks to divide us, here we are gathered in. Where compassion seems thin, here it is offered – again and again. Where civility – respect for difference of opinion-- seems scarce these days, here we can not only hope to find it, we can do our part and help make it happen. We find more and more ways to reflect God’s healing light. We set tables for the homeless, we visit those who are lonely, we invite new people into our homes, we practice forgiveness one with another. We put money in the plate for the Good Samaritan offering and someone has electricity another month, or groceries on their shelves, or a bed rather than a sofa to sleep on. We share our life experiences, in hopes it just might help another person find their way. There are, good friends, so many ways to *be* light in this dark world. Epiphany helps to define the church – as that place where we put ourselves in light filled places, places of love and attention - - human connection – in order that we might be light ourselves.

Isaiah's vision has all these people coming together to form what in the hymnody is called *a sacred throng*. They come together, like the magi they process to a place of illumination, a place of light, that is not for one person alone, but for all. "God's grace reaches out and calls in every last one of God's beloved children who will come from every compass point to worship God, to kneel before Jesus, and to dine at the heavenly banquet." (from *Feasting on the Word*, Epiphany Sunday, p. 198, Year C, Vol 1, Kendra Hotz)

There is a hymn that sings this line: "Oh that with yonder Sacred throng we at his feet may fall." Michael is going to play a bar of that hymn now: (*Michael plays a verse of All Hail the Power of Jesus Name*)

Today as we come to the communion table, let us imagine ourselves bathed in light, in the light of God's wide expansive love. Let us imagine ourselves being gathered in, as others before us have been gathered in, and as others who will come after us will also be. And let us imagine ourselves being light. Light to one another, and light to each person we encounter.

Amen.