

SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift 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.

⁵Then 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.

⁶A 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

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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."

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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.'"

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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."

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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.

SERMON: Seek and you shall find

Today is the last Sunday of the Christmas season; tomorrow marks the first day of Epiphany.

An “epiphany” is when something reveals itself, or shows itself – it’s a lightbulb moment - an aha moment. In the church, the season of Epiphany is when The Son of God reveals his glory for everyone to see. Not that the heavens don’t always declare the majesty of God; though God is gentle he is not at all shy. I’m talking more about what happens within the church. For the next two months our whole liturgy - the scripture readings, the hymns, the sermons – everything that you see and hear and sing and pray in our worship service will serve one purpose, and that purpose is to reveal to you, to show you, the glory of your Savior Jesus Christ.

Since Epiphany is about revelation, we symbolize it by speaking about light – moving from darkness to light. “Arise,” God says, “Shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.” The Bible pictures you and me and the rest of the world as a group of people who are living in darkness, people who have been waiting and yearning and longing for the sun to rise: “See,” God says, “darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over all the people.”

God pictures our world as a very dark place. Spiritually dark. You can see evidence of spiritual darkness by looking around you – for many people 2019 was a year in which the darkness seemed to have the upper hand – anger, hate, intolerance – these are themes of the past year. We’ve seen natural disasters, continuing conflict, a seemingly unending stream of refugees – so much so that we are becoming inured to them. The papers don’t even bother reporting much on them anymore.

In our own communities we see domestic violence, homelessness, poverty, racism, sexism. These are evidences of spiritual darkness. Look around you, watch people, listen to them talk, see what they do, and it will become very clear to you that our world is a very dark place spiritually.

What is true out there is also true inside. Popular culture assures us that inside we are all good, and if we would only follow our feelings the world would be lovely. While it is true that there is good within us – God put it there – it’s his image, his mark, it is also true that all the darkness out there originated from in here.

Indeed, “a thick darkness is over the people, but...” God says, “the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.” The birth of the Lord, Jesus Christ, is described in the Bible as the rising of the sun on a very dark place. The sun rises; the darkness flees.

Jesus came for the sole purpose of doing what you and I cannot do – set things right between ourselves and God. Because of Christ we all have an invitation to move from our darkness into God’s light.

We tell the story of the Magi on Epiphany, because this is a journey from darkness to light. These Magi came from a place where nobody knew about the Christ. No one knew about the one true God who was sending a Savior. But somehow, the Magi knew. And when they saw his star, somehow they knew that the Messiah had come.

And so these men left their land of spiritual darkness because they wanted to see and worship God in the world. They made the long trip to Jerusalem, and when they got there they were probably surprised to see that this city was just as spiritually dark as the land they had come from.

That's because nobody in Jerusalem knew anything about the new king either. The temple priests, who were supposed to be the link between God and his people, the Pharisees who knew the Scriptures inside and out, the Rabbis who debated the meaning of the Torah, and the pretender king Herod, the regent who sat on the throne – not one of them had heard of this new king, even though by the time the Magi had arrived Jesus was already more than a year old. All of Jerusalem was dark. And in walked the Magi.

Now, as we try to make sense of these biblical stories, one technique is to try to put ourselves into the story – how do we fit in? What characters represent us?

At one point all of us have been Magi. Let me unpack that a little. The Magi were foreigners – they were not God's people, they were outsiders. We've all been there – we've all been counted among the unbelievers of the world. Even those of you who grew up in Christian households spent time as non-believers. When we're young we come to church and do the things that are expected of us. We follow the rules because we are told to. That doesn't make us believers, that merely makes us obedient.

But there comes a time, maybe in adolescence, maybe later on as an adult, that we consciously choose to take on the faith of our parents as our own. This is usually the result of an encounter – an experience of the presence of the Living God. In light of this experience, and the relationship that springs out of it, suddenly all those stories that we have been hearing take on new meaning. They stop being stories and they become life. This is an epiphany – a revelation – moving from darkness to light.

All of us, like the Magi, began our journeys as outsiders.

Secondly, the Magi came to Christ – I don't want to say in the wrong way – but in a less than pure manner. Certainly not ideal. They followed a star. That's bad behavior according to the Scriptures.

Leviticus 19:26, Deuteronomy 18:10-12, Isaiah 47:13-14, Jeremiah 10:2 all strongly condemn using the stars as signs. God's people are not to do astrology, in fact, we learn in 2nd Kings that the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians was in part a result of God's people using astrology.

I suspect that none of us followed a star to get to church this morning, but how did we end up in these seats? What brought us here? Was it a pure and noble love of God – or something else?

I know someone who started coming to church looking for a girlfriend. Others who saw it as a good place to make business connections, people networking for a job, folks looking for food, people seeking comfort after a loss, some looking for status in the community, others submitting to pressure from family. Some folks come to instill Christian values in their children, even when they don't believe themselves. There are many things that draw us to church that first time, and rarely is that reason God. That's just as true of me as it is of anyone.

And that's ok. That is part of the lesson of the Magi. It doesn't matter where we come from, and it doesn't matter how we got here. All that matters is what happens next.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.

When the Magi realized that they had reached the place they had been seeking they were filled with joy and excitement. They entered the house of the Lord with expectation, and when they finally had that first encounter with God they could do nothing other than bow down and worship him. Their presents for the king had to wait because they were overwhelmed by the presence of the king. That's when you'll know that you have arrived – when you've experienced that total immersion into the oneness of being that fills you with such awe and wonder that it drives out everything else.

And make no mistake – this encounter with God that shakes you to your core and begins a process of total transformation is what we're after. Whatever brought us here in the first place; social connections, opportunities – whatever it was – is not the real thing, it is not our final goal. Don't settle for anything less than being touched by your Creator. The Magi didn't worship the star. Once they crossed the threshold the star no longer held any meaning for them.

If, when I talk about a total immersion into the oneness of being, you don't know what I'm talking about, and your heart is not burning with recognition, then come and see me. This is not an experience reserved for super-Christians – this is the relationship Jesus offers to each one of us, and wants for each one of us. Sometimes we just need a little help to open up and make ourselves receptive to it.

So, the story of the Magi is a story of great hope – that the coming of Jesus means that there is no-one who is excluded from God's family. It makes no difference where we come from or how we get here. Once we enter into God's presence we are accepted, we are treasured, and we are one.

This story also contains a warning. Along the way, the Magi took a wrong turn. They assumed that the king would be found in a palace in the capital city, so once in Judea that is where they headed.

Imagine their surprise as they approached this holy city of God and found it in darkness. Nobody had heard of the birth of the Messiah, even though it was likely a good year since his birth. Not the secular rulers, not the religious teachers.

The Temple was a landmark that dominated the horizon for miles around, it was one of the wonders of the world. Everybody could see the temple, but nobody, it seemed, could see God.

Even when the scribes found that clue buried in the writings of the prophet Micah;

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,

they did not dispatch any witnesses of their own to see if the Messiah was in fact there.

I fully understand why Herod, the client king, would not want the birth of the Messiah to become public knowledge. But why the silence of the scribes? Hadn't all of Israel been waiting a long, long time for their Messiah to come and set them free from the yoke of the Romans? This is something that I simply don't understand.

It seems as though all of God's people were so wrapped up in their daily affairs that they had little inclination to seek after their God.

Just as we have much in common with the Magi, so too with the Judeans of two thousand years ago. At the time of Jesus' birth God's people were just working, paying the bills, keeping the Romans off their backs and going to Temple on Sabbath. We too, often live with our heads down, absorbed in our day to day tasks, just getting by, following our routines.

If we are not careful, it is all too easy for our churches to resemble a city in darkness. The Magi were shocked to arrive in the holy city and learn that none of the people had any idea what their God was doing, or where their God was.

If an outsider joins us today and asks where our God is, do we have an answer, or will she merely get a blank stare? Does we need to see that stranger bowing at the feet of Jesus and looking around in bewilderment wondering why everybody isn't crammed into that small room to see the miracle to wake us up to the fact that while we were busy God appeared in a way that we didn't expect?

We have a family verse for the coming year. It's from the prophet Isaiah.

See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

It's a reminder to us that God cannot be put in a box. God is not predictable. God appears in the pillar of fire, but also in the face of a child. God is God of the storm, but also God of the stillness.

God appears miraculously in places and in ways that we don't expect. If we remember that God seems to thrive on unexpected appearances and if we keep expecting to see God everywhere we turn, we are much more likely to turn a corner and stumble into him. That is an epiphany – a revelation.

Kyoungsoo shared something with me from a book that she is reading. Essentially, the thought was that modern humans have largely lost the ability to be awed. We are so busy with our distractions and entertainment – never more than a moment away from our screens and our to do lists – that we are dulled to the presence of God. We simply will not find that which we are not seeking.

All of us begin as Magi. We all come from outside and with joy we encounter God. We drop everything and fall at his feet.

But we also have a tendency to forget. We don't maintain that relationship, we turn away and we become like the dark city – dull, routine, oblivious.

We were not called to be the dark city – we are called to be a city of light on a hill – a beacon for weary travellers, not a wrong stop.

It's Epiphany – revelation time. To those that knock, the door will be opened. Those who seek will find. If we want to meet God in our lives, we had better begin by expecting him and watching for him. Do we act as though we are expecting to meet God today? Do we prepare for God to come? For that matter, have we even given an invitation?

On Sunday mornings, do we prepare for church by asking for and expecting God to speak to us in the music, in the sermon, through the others in the congregation? How many of us honestly, truly expect a real, life-changing encounter with God when we enter these doors in the morning? I can tell you that those few who do expect such things do find them.

God is here to be encountered – God is among you in the pews, in the sacrament of Communion, in the Scripture reading, in the offering. From the songs we sing, to the prayers we pray, to the sermons that are preached, the ultimate purpose of all of this is to provide an environment in which together we seek to experience the epiphany of God. It's not about conjuring up God, but softening and opening our hearts and minds to begin to perceive the God who is already here in our midst. It's about allowing ourselves to experience wonder again.

Make space in your life to have a real encounter with God. It might happen here; it might happen at home, or out there in the world...but expect that it will happen.

May this Epiphany season be for you a time when you see ever more clearly the glory of your Savior, Jesus Christ. "Arise, shine, for your light has come. And the glory of the Lord rises upon you."
Amen.