

## Scriptures

### Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
<sup>2</sup>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.  
<sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
<sup>4</sup>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.  
<sup>5</sup>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.  
<sup>6</sup>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

**2** In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
<sup>6</sup> '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.'"  
<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### Sermon: Three Wrong Men

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Today is the last Sunday of the Christmas season. Friday is the official beginning of Epiphany.

An "epiphany" is when something reveals itself, or shows itself – it's an aha moment. In the church, the season of Epiphany season is when The Son of God reveals his glory for everyone to see. For the next two months 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.

Epiphany is all 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 living in darkness, people who have been waiting and waiting and waiting for the sun to rise: “See,” God says, “darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over 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 2016 is a year in which the darkness won – anger, hate, intolerance – these are themes of the past year. We’ve seen war, refugees – millions of people on the move, wandering without a purpose, trying to find a safe place to live and raise their families. In our own communities we see domestic violence, homelessness, 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.

But the most frightening place to look is within yourself. Daytime TV celebrities will tell you that there is an incredible amount of good, and an incredible amount of strength inside yourself: “If you would only reach deep within yourself, you would see how good you really are!” But this has not proven to be the case – all the darkness out there originated from in here.

Indeed, “a thick darkness is over the peoples, 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, and the darkness disappears.

Jesus came for the sole purpose of doing what you can not do – making everything right between you and God. Because of Christ we all have an invitation to move from darkness to 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 no one 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 the Christ. 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 king. 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 a year and a half old. Jerusalem was dark.

There is a very clear message in this story, and that is that God is not limited in how he reaches out to us, though we may be very limited in how we perceive him. None of the religious folk – those ones who were supposed to know what God was up to - had any idea what God was doing among them.

But the Magi did. These three wrong men did. Everything about them was wrong. First of all, they were the wrong people – they weren’t God’s people. When you hear the word Magi you probably think magic or magician, and indeed these words are related. The Magi were Zoroastrian sorcerers, magicians, astrologers who read the stars. They were not the kind of people that good Jews would ever eat dinner with, or invite into their homes.

Secondly, they came at the wrong time. Though this story is placed just following the nativity, these Magi showed up at Herod's palace about a year and a half after Jesus was born.

Third, the Magi used the wrong method to learn of Jesus. They read the stars. 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings that the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians was in part a result of God's people using astrology.

Wrong people, wrong time, wrong roadmap, and indeed they ended up at the wrong place. These wise men followed the star in the heavens for months, maybe even a year, but when they approached Judah they just naturally assumed that the king would be found in the capital city in the palace – this is how they ended up in Herod's court.

There, the chief priests and teachers of the law consulted the scriptures and it was in the written word of God that they found that the king was to be born in Bethlehem. The star woke them up to God, but could not lead them to Christ. For that, they needed scripture.

So, these Magi were wrong in so many ways – wrong people, wrong time, wrong method of learning of Jesus, and they ended up in the wrong place. And yet – there is also something very right about them. There is a reason that these three were included in the book of books, and it's not just that these are the first men in recorded history to stop and ask for directions.

What we learn from the Magi is that when we do get a sign, it is time to take action. These Wise Men could have seen the star, noted it down on their star charts and done nothing more. They could have realized that this sign probably heralded something very special, reported it to the appropriate authorities, and then gone back to their normal lives.

But no! They put a commitment to their conviction. They put feet on their faith, and they began a journey - a long journey, but one with God himself at the end. The story of the Magi helps us to see that there is something special - something remarkable - that awaits us at the end of the journey, if only we will get up and move.

When God presents us with a new opportunity, are we willing to get up and begin a journey of faith? That star was visible to everyone in that part of the world, why were these Magi the only ones who saw it and responded to it?

We often live with our heads down, absorbed in our day to day tasks, just getting by. Certainly that seems to be what most people were doing around Jesus' birth – just working, paying the bills, keeping the Romans off their backs and going to Temple on Sabbath.

Like those people, many of us today have lost our sense of excitement and expectation. In the early church, the point of Epiphany was not to remember history, but instead to be reminded that God appears miraculously to us 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 catch him when he acts.

If we want to meet God in our lives, we had better begin by expecting him and watching for him. If you are expecting company in your home, you have made preparations for their coming, you fully expect to see them, and keep an ear tuned for the doorbell or an eye out the window. Yet how many of us expect God in that way? 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 find them. But if you don't expect something miraculous to happen here, I'm not sure why you would even come.

If we aren't looking for God at every turn and listening for God in every voice, chances are we'll be as clueless as the rest of Israel who had no idea that the son of God had been born among them. But, if we're looking, the signs of God's presence are all around us, as much outside the church as inside.

Many people call Epiphany the "Gentile Christmas," because one of the main themes of the Epiphany season is that Christ is a light, not just for a select group of people like the Jews, but for all people, all over the world. Epiphany is when anyone living in the darkness of sin, people like you and me and those wise men from the east – anyone can come and see the glory of God, as he is revealed through the person of Jesus Christ.

The message of Epiphany is that God is alive and calling to us here, there, and everywhere knowing that some people will be paying attention. The God who was made manifest in Jesus of Nazareth lives and was made manifest somewhere, somehow in your own home this very morning. The God that was calling to you in our last hymn is the God that will be revealed right after the service during social time, or out in the parking lot, or in a hospital room. The message of Epiphany is, "Keep watch!" For you don't know the day or the hour when God will appear.

God is here to be encountered – 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 we are together seeking to experience the epiphany of God...this is a time that is structured in such a way as to encourage people to open their eyes and see the God who is here in our midst.

As we wind our way from Epiphany through the Lenten season to Easter, let God into your life. Make space in your life to have a real encounter with God. It might be here; it might be anywhere...but expect that it will happen. Get up in the morning wondering where it will come and go to sleep listening for God's voice. Read your Bible expecting to hear God and come to worship open to receive. God will be here. I promise.

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.