

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Follow the Light

Sermon Reflection Notes

Epiphany is the Sunday on the church calendar when we celebrate that Jesus's story is also a story that invites Gentiles to come along. Jesus's story brings salvation to *all* people, and it is a light that shines in the darkness. We know the text, *Matthew 2:1-12*, that tells of the three wise men following the star to find the new baby king of Jerusalem. We may even know that they would have been considered pretty strange in their day—astrologers and star-gazers, magi who dressed in funny clothes. They might have been easy to dismiss, but they saw the signs the priests and scribes in Jerusalem had missed. They followed a star, dancing in the night sky and sought a new king, a new way of life, a new relationship with God. They also seemed to fulfill an ancient prophecy found in *Isaiah*.

Isaiah 60 begins with well-known words: "Arise, shine, for your light has come" and we read this poem each year at this time because Christians can't help but hear Jesus in the story. Light = Jesus; travelers on camels with gold and frankincense = three kings of orient. It just couldn't be more clear. But it is important to remember that poems like this one in *Isaiah* gave hope to people long before Jesus was born. Found in the last section of the book of *Isaiah*, this scripture comes from a dark time in Israel's history. They spent sixty years in Babylonian exile. Cyrus finally allowed some Israelites to return to Jerusalem, but they were not returning to the same land they had left. The city was destroyed and the temple was in ruins. It turned out rebuilding was really, really hard. The situation was bleak and threatened to extinguish what little hope they might have left. Into this darkness, *Isaiah* spoke of light. And in addition to shouting that light has come, *Isaiah* demands that the people "arise and shine" which is sometimes translated as 'stand up and glow.' God's glory broke through the darkness despite a malevolent tyrant ruling in Jerusalem. The darkness didn't disappear, but the darkness could not snuff out the light—even though it tried. The darkness could not snuff out the light in ancient Jerusalem, it could not at Jesus's crucifixion, and it cannot even today.

The light is the glory of God, and people will flock to it. The beauty of Epiphany today is that we too can see the little punctures of light in an otherwise dark world. We too can be little punctures of light, standing and glowing for all the world to see. Rise, shine, reflect the love of God. For that is Epiphany.

Scripture

Isaiah 60:1-16 (NRSVUE)

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 in 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.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Over the course of Advent, Christmas, and now Epiphany we have heard the stories of shepherds, of Mary, of Joseph, of magi (three wise men). What is a common theme running through all these stories? What do they suggest to us as we bear witness in the modern world?
2. Pastor Ron said: "I trust the faith that has been given to me, but I love what Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote: 'I asked God for religious certainty, and God gave me relationships instead. I asked for solid ground, and God gave me human beings instead—strange, funny, compelling, complicated human beings—who keep puncturing my stereotypes, challenging my ideas, and upsetting my ideas about God, so that they are always under construction.'" What does it mean to trust the faith that has been given to us? What does it mean to have a faith that is always under construction?
3. What is an epiphany? What are some examples? What is Epiphany in the church? What epiphanies do we find in this story of the wise men's experiences?
4. Pastor Ron said: "Epiphany is a flash of wild hope in God when there is plenty of reason for despair." What epiphanies do we see in the life of ManchesterUMC and/or in our lives?
5. Amanda Gorman, the poet who spoke at Biden's inauguration in 2021, wrote in her poem "The Hill We Climb":
*The new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it,
if only we're brave enough to be it.*

What do Gorman's words mean to you? What thoughts do her words spark? What echoes are heard from Isaiah?

6. We continue to search for hope and light in the darkness. We continue to try to be hope and light in the darkness, and sometimes we need to sit down and just look for the light ourselves. In what ways do these texts and sermons lead us toward finding and being that hope and light?

Closing Prayer

The world seems filled with darkness; there is a long list of threats around us- leaders who choose destruction over community, illnesses, violence, loneliness, guilt, shame, and death. Like the Israelites who returned to Jerusalem from exile, we become discouraged and fearful because we wonder if your promises will indeed be kept. But we hear your voice in the Easter

words: "Do not be afraid" and in the words of your prophet Isaiah: "Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord will arise upon you."

Open our eyes, O God, so that we might see the light of the stars, pushing their way into our darkness. Open our ears so that we might hear your word of hope. Open our hearts so that we might reflect your holy light. The light is your glory, your love, your promise. Help us to know it well and believe that it is a promise that will be kept. In the name of Jesus, may it be so. Amen.

"Arise, shine! Stand up and glow!"