

January 8th, 2023

Isaiah 60:1-6 “Rise and Shine!”

Last week I said that Epiphany was all about the pagans. This week it's all about the camels. See, it all depends on which Epiphany scripture you choose on any given year, and there are only two – Matthew 2:1-22 which we studied last week, or Isaiah 60:1-6 that Kathy just read. Those are the two choices you get every year. So I looked back on my sermons over the last 15 years and discovered that I've only used the Matthew text. For 15 years I've only told you the story of the magi who followed the star and brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ Child. Then last week I dropped a bomb on you which after 15 years shouldn't surprise you. I said, “Some say that the magi were ‘wise men’ meaning philosophers or scholars. Some say they were alchemists or astrologers.” But then I said, “Our opening song this morning was, ‘We Three Kings’ *because some mistakenly believe that they were royalty.*” Then I left you hanging by telling you that I'd explain that this week.

You may be thinking, “What in the world does Jesse have against the magi? Every year he has to make some smart aleck remark about how we don't know how many magi visited Jesus and we automatically assume it's three because there were three gifts. Then you gripe about biblically inaccurate nativity sets with a blue-eyed Jesus while we roll our eyes. So what, now you're going to ruin, ‘We Three Kings’ for us too?” Not really. I like that song. But I am going to dig into *why* we assume the wise men were kings when Matthew's gospel doesn't say *anything* about it.

The text we've never read on Epiphany, at least since I've been here, is this one from Isaiah 60 that Kathy read. Clearly there's some connective tissue here between the Isaiah text and Matthew's birth story. The two lines that stands out the most are verse 3 – “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” and the last half of verse 6 – “They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” Okay then, nations and kings will come to the light

and will bring gold and frankincense. And camels. No myrrh, but *lots* of camels! This is why we sing “We Three *Kings* of Orient Are” instead of “We the Undisclosed Number of Zoroastrian Mystics Are.” Clearly Matthew was making a connection to this passage in Isaiah. But what was going on in Isaiah? Well, this was written after the Israelites were released from captivity in Babylon. Isaiah was offering a word of hope now that they were back home in Israel. They came out of the dark and into God’s light. God’s light will now shine upon them and guide them and they will once again be seen and sought after by other nations. Those nations, in return, will share their wealth and give praise to God. Then Isaiah goes on for another three chapters about how great things are going to be for Israel now that they’re back in their homeland. He spends two chapters after that offering words of repentance for the things they did that got them exiled in the first place. Then he ends the book by saying, “All these things can be yours once again. Just don’t mess it up this time.” Spoiler alert – they messed it up again.

Let’s jump ahead 500 years and see what’s going on. The good news is that Israel isn’t in exile. They’re still in their homeland. But they *are* under Roman occupation, and the “king” that Caesar allowed Israel to have was corrupt as all get out. King Herod didn’t care about whether the people of Israel were fulfilling their divine destiny. He was too busy enjoying the perks that the Romans gave him for not letting things get “too Jewish.” As we’ve been learning in Bible study, Matthew’s gospel was written for a Jewish audience which explains why he, in his account of Jesus’ birth, puts the spotlight on the wise men. Luke doesn’t even mention them. He’s all about the shepherds. So Matthew’s story of the wise men who came from afar to bring gifts to Jesus was a nod to Isaiah’s prophesy. The light of God that is found in the Christ-child was able to attract people from the east who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh but *not* to King Herod. They brought these gifts to the Christ-child. The *real* kind of Israel. And of course, King Herod was jealous, and wanted to snuff out that light. But darkness cannot overcome light. Which is what the author of John’s gospel wrote in his “birth story” that took place at the beginning of creation. See? It all fits

together! That's why we're having two epiphany Sundays this year. Plus it just wasn't going to work out taking the decorations down last Sunday so, here we are.

What I wanted to draw your attention to in this epiphany text from Isaiah is this first verse - "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Here's the question I want us to consider this morning -- "Is this the light of God, or the light of Israel?" And before you say, "Oh, come on Jesse, that's obvious, it's the light of God. You just said 'the light of God found in the Christ-child.'" Yes, but this passage in Isaiah was written long before Jesus was born.

In his commentary on Isaiah, James Newsome writes, "The words are wondrously and deliberately ambiguous. 'Your light' is in fact Yahweh, who is Israel's only source of hope and possibility. At the same time, however, 'your light' refers to Israel's own 'glow,' which is a gift of Yahweh that changes the very character of Israel. Thus 'your light' is both intrusion from Yahweh and restored Israel."

So it's a both/and situation. God is the light, but that light is reflected in us too. Remember that Jesus in Matthew 5:14-16 said,

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

So how do we let God's light shine through us? Here's where we go back to what I was saying last week about developing healthy spirituality. And again I'm not talking about a surface-level spirituality. I'm talking about cultivating a way of life that relates who we are to who God is as revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the Holy Spirit. I suggested that it's time to prepare ourselves for Lent by

learning how to encourage one another in the spiritual disciplines and practices. Doing that open ourselves up to being shaped by God. But before we do that, we need to set our intention for the year. “Oh, you mean make new year’s resolutions?” No. New year’s resolutions are terrible. They don’t work. Resolutions are goals we set and often fail to achieve. Then when we start a new year, we spend too much time kicking ourselves for the goals we failed to achieve the year before which contaminates how we set goals for the following year. We’ll either say, “Well, I’ll just lower my standards this year,” or we’ll swing the opposite direction and say, “I’ll set a harder goal this year to make up for the goal that I didn’t achieve last year.” It’s a vicious cycle and doesn’t help us grow at all. Setting intention is different though.

Intentions are not goals. They are things we work toward. Here’s how I set my intention this year -- One of the things I discovered over the course of the pandemic shut-down was how difficult it was for me to re-connect with community once quarantine restrictions started to relax. I know quarantine was difficult for a lot of people, but for me it was kind of nice. The upside was that I learned to slow down and do some “inner work” and not buy into the lie that my effort and energy is what makes the world go around. The downside was that I convinced myself that the world didn’t need me at all and that I could just stay in my happy little self-care bubble and run things from there. If I was just making a resolution, I might say, “This year, I’m going to try to re-connect with community” which, by definition, would be an acceptable intention because it’s not really a goal. It’s not like I’m saying, “This year I’m going to volunteer ‘x’ number of hours to a community-related project.” But if I dig a little deeper, I can refine it a bit. So my intention this year is, “Practice balance.” Not “achieve balance” or “be balanced,” but “practice balance” which, I believe, will lead me in the right direction to reconnect with community. How did I come to this conclusion? With some direction of course, which thankfully I have a spiritual director who helps in that department. But it also involved prayer and reflection.

Earlier in the service I gave you all a tool that my spiritual director uses sometimes. When I was looking through this year's advent resources, there was an activity called "Star Cards," and when I looked at the instructions I said, "Oh! These are 'Angel Cards!'" I already had angel cards and so instead of having Briony print and cut out a bunch of star shaped cards I just decided to let you all have my angel cards. Each of these cards has a word on it that you're supposed to reflect on. Some examples are, "Love, enthusiasm, acceptance, harmony, freedom." The one I drew is, "adventure." If I didn't know what these cards were about I'd say, "What ... I'm into adventure. I go out kayaking, camping, and hiking – I love roller coasters -- I'm all about adventure!" But that's not what these cards are for. They're not like fortune cookies. The word you draw is meant for reflection. The word itself is not your intention nor is it some omen for what your intention should be. It's just tool to help you think out of the box a little. Maybe ask, "Where does this word fit in my life right now?" Or, "Where in my life does this word *apply* now?" Maybe if you've already set your intention for the year you could say, "How is this word related to the intention I already set?" It's your word. You do with it what you want. Oh, by the way, there are some blank ones in there too. Not many, so it's not likely you'll get one, but if you do it still applies. It's all about reflection. I just offer it as a tool for this season of working on that "deep Christian spirituality" aspect of being a Disciple. But for now, may the Bethlehem star bring us out of darkness and into the light of Christ. May God's light be in each of you as we are transformed through God's grace.