

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)

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 on 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.

[6] 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 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, [2] 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." [3] When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; [4] and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. [5] They 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.' "

[7] Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. [8] 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." [9] 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. [10] When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. [11] 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. [12] And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Ephesians 3:1-12 (NRSV)

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- [2] for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, [3] and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, [4] a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. [5] In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: [6] that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

[7] Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. [8] Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, [9] and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; [10] so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. [11] This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, [12] in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

SEEKING THE LIGHT

Did you see the dueling editorials in the sports section of this week's Orlando Sentinel? It was Mike Thomas against some character from Ohio. Each one was using their wit and literary license in an attempt to say that Ohio is better than Florida or visa versa and that the Florida Gators are going to beat up on the Ohio State Buckeyes ... or visa versa.

I want to make it clear to my parishioners who are from both Florida and Ohio that I am perfectly neutral on this issue. I am after all a graduate of Baylor University where learning to be apathetic about football is a survival skill.

However, Mike Thomas did make one excellent point in his defense of Florida. If we are such a bad state, why do so many people from Ohio continue to move down here?

I think I know the answer to that. They come for the sunshine. You don't have to shovel sunshine. Northerners are drawn to the light, and there's a reason for that.

Did you know that getting enough light is vital to your mental health? That's right. Spend too many dark winters inside and you're liable to get depressed. They even have a name for it, Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD for short. People with this problem are often treated by being required to sit in front of a bank of specially designed lights each day.

Light is important. Light is necessary. And that's why the Bible uses light as a symbol of salvation. Light is a sign of life and light is a symbol of God's presence. God's light is referred to in the Bible as glory. And God's glory shines with an intensity that (as the old spiritual puts it) "outshines the sun."

EXILE

Just as sunlight lifts our spirits, so the glory of God lifts the spirits of His broken people. The context of our lesson from the Old Testament is important. When Isaiah wrote poetically about the glory of God coming Israel, it was not a sunny day for God's people ... far from it.

The people of God had been captured by the Babylonians and taken into exile. The beautiful city of Jerusalem and the holy temple lay in ruins. Most people had given up hope of ever returning home since now they had been in this foreign land for several generations.

Their children were becoming more Babylonian than Jewish. And that was deeply troubling to the ones who wanted to remain faithful to God. It was as if their whole world had gone dark. The Bible tells us that it was a thick darkness, a deep darkness.

Where was God when they needed him?
The light of his presence seemed extinguished forever.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

But, God has a way of coming when the night is darkest. God has a way of saving when the cause seems hopeless. It is God's way of showing His people that salvation does not depend upon us but upon Him.

Precisely when we think there is no hope, that we cannot save ourselves that we are as good as dead ... God speaks. He speaks to us as he spoke to his captive people long ago. In the middle of the long, dark night we hear,

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

Isaiah 60:1 (NRSV)

Originally this was an invitation for Israel to return to the land of the living, to return from exile to the Promised Land. Considering all that they had lost, this announcement was like an invitation to resurrection. Like Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones in which skeletons are reanimated by the proclamation of God's word, this prophecy is an invitation to believe the impossible.

Who could believe that dry bones could live? And who could believe that the light of God's presence could come to a people without hope and a place to call their own?

But, with God all things are possible. God would lift them up. Their eyes had been downcast too long. Now was the time for them to look up instead of about. And when they look up they will be amazed by what they see.

There would be a grand family reunion. The sons and daughters separated from their families by the exile would return. The land flowing with milk and honey would once again be a place of abundance, a place where the sea would give up her bounty to God's people.

The glory of God's presence would return to his people. And the reflected shine would attract others to their new kingdom.

Those outside Israel would be drawn to the light. Kings would come with their wealth. They would come with many camels.

And these visitors would bring precious gifts ... gold and frankincense. Even these strangers from afar would praise the Lord and the scope of His salvation.

THE MAGI SEEK JESUS

Is this story starting to sound vaguely familiar to you?

God's word has a way of being true not only for the generation to which it is spoken but also for the generations to come. Long after Isaiah wrote down these poetic, prophetic words, and long after God's people had returned to the Promised Land, another light began to shine.

Once again it was the light of God's presence. A new star had risen and some astrologers from the East thought that it meant a new king had been born. So these strangers from the East, these unorthodox magi came seeking to worship the one who was born king of the Jews.

Where do you go when you want to find the one who will one day be king? If you wanted to find the next king of England you would probably begin your search in Buckingham Palace. And if you want to find the next king of the Jews, you would go to King Herod's palace in Jerusalem.

At least that's what these outsiders from the East thought.

But, they ... along with Herod and the rest of the nation ... were wrong. The seat of power is not always located where you think it might be.

No, the one born king of the Jews was not born in the capitol, Jerusalem. The normally precise astrologers had missed the Messiah by a mile. Actually, they missed the Messiah by ten miles. The Messiah was ten miles south of Jerusalem in Bethlehem. In lowly Bethlehem the child was born. The future king was far from the palace in Jerusalem and far from any trappings that we normally associate with power and influence.

AN OUT OF CONTROL GOD

And that's what made Herod and the people so afraid. Despite our protests to the contrary, all of us want a God that we can placate and domesticate. We want a God on a leash who speaks on command. We want a God who blesses our capitol and our way of life. And so we are always afraid when we are confronted with the God who like Frank Sinatra does it "his way."

There's an old joke about an aid to the Pope coming in breathlessly and saying "I've got some good news and some bad news." And the Pope asks, "What's the good news?" And the messenger replies, "I've got God on the phone!" And the Pope responds, "That's wonderful. How could there be any bad news?" The crestfallen servant replies, "He's calling from Salt Lake City!"

God didn't come to Salt Lake City, but he did come to Bethlehem ... just as unlikely a place for a king to be born ... at least from Herod's perspective.

Herod didn't know that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Like everyone else he just assumed that the Messiah would come from his palace. But, now with these disturbing Magi from the East challenging his right to rule, Herod suddenly becomes interested in Bible study.

He summons the Old Testament department from the local college ... otherwise known as the Chief Priests and the Scribes and asks, "Where will

the Messiah be born?" They tell the king the bad news that the Messiah will be born not in Jerusalem where he rules but in Bethlehem, and they quote the prophet Micah as their proof text,

“ '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.' ”

Now Herod is really nervous. What's in Bethlehem won't stay in Bethlehem. One day he will have to confront this upstart. It's better to kill him now while he's young and vulnerable.

And so Herod sends everyone away except these strangers from the East. He takes a deep breath to calm the butterflies in his stomach and then he asks in a voice that is as smooth as glass,

“Now exactly when did this star appear? Are you sure? Listen, I'll tell you what. Go to Bethlehem, find this child, and when you've found him send word to me. I want to honor him as well.”

I have often wondered if the Magi really believed what Herod had to say. What kind of king is willing to give up his throne? We know from history that Herod was not shy about using force to keep his station in life. He knew where all the “bodies were buried” because he was responsible for most of their murders. Sadaam Hussein could have well modeled his reign of terror after old King Herod.

JOY FOR OUTSIDERS

We sometimes refer to the Magi as Wise Men, but if they believed what Herod had to say they obviously arrived in Jerusalem by falling off the turnip truck instead of coming by camel! We really don't know what the Magi thought. They just kept their mouths shut and moved on down the road, the road to Bethlehem.

Every step of the way they saw the star of God's presence. Even with the threat of Herod looming over them, they were not deterred. They were convinced that this child was someone special.

And when they saw the star hovering over the place where Jesus lived, they rejoiced. They were overwhelmed with joy. And they entered the house where the holy family lived and brought their gifts to Jesus, "gold, frankincense and myrrh," precious gifts, gifts that were meant for a king.

And these Magi, these outsiders who know more than anyone else in Israel when it comes to the Messiah learn one thing more. They have a dream, and in their dream they are warned not to return to Herod. And so they go home by another route. Silently and mysteriously these unlikely heralds of hope fade into the dark eastern sky.

Why does Matthew include their story?

And why do we include their story as a part of Christmas celebration?.

The Magi are the beginning of a procession of outsiders who see in Jesus the mystery of God's presence and salvation. They are harbingers of things to come.

Not only do outsiders bring the news of the Messiah's birth, in the gospels the outsiders understand the hope better than the religious and political insiders. It is the people on the fringes of life who can see the light, and at the end of the story it is not a religious person but a Roman Centurion who proclaims as Jesus dies,

"Surely this man was the Son of God."

And when the risen Christ gives his disciples their final commission, it is no longer a matter of non-Jews coming to Bethlehem, but of Jewish disciples going out to all the nations to spread the good news about Jesus and God's salvation.

As the Apostle Paul put it in our reading from Ephesians, the mystery of the gospel has now been given to all people. In Jesus Christ the light of salvation has dawned on the whole world.

FOLLOWING THE STAR TODAY

How will we respond to the proclamation of the Magi?

Can we see the star points the way to God's presence and God's salvation?
Will we have the faith to arise and reflect that glorious light?
Can we dare to hope when all around us are the ashes of despair and destruction?

Like God's people of old many of us begin our year in Exile. 2006 was not the year we wanted it to be, and we have more than a little fear when it comes to 2007. No wonder Pat Robertson is predicting a terrible disaster in 2007. His prediction reflects the fear that is so much a part of our modern world.

I'm afraid that I don't have such a direct line to the Almighty. I can't tell you if disaster is to befall us all in 2007.

But, one thing I do know. The light of God's presence shone on this earth a long time ago. Wise men from the East saw it, and they left everything to seek the source of that light.

They were changed by the one they found ... even though he was just a child.

According to the Bible, they went home another way. They went home another way because they were warned about Herod by a dream. But, I think that they also went home "another way" because they were changed men. They had a hope in their hearts that would never leave them.

And that same light still shines in our darkness. The question for us is this, will we leave everything to follow the light or will we choose to stay at home in the darkness?

It seems to me that this story gives us a choice between two dreams.

HEROD'S DREAM

First, there is the dream of Herod, a dream of power and control. The Bible tells us that many of his subjects had the same dream. And when a light came into their life that threatened this dream Herod and his subjects were deeply troubled.

They were afraid. They preferred the darkness to the light.

They were the ones whom John wrote about in his gospel. He wrote, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [10] He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” John 1:9-11 (NRSV)

We are quick to dismiss Herod and his fearful ways. But, I think that Herod lives in us as well. We are tempted by the dream of power and control. We are tempted to believe that we are in charge of our life and our destiny, that God helps those who help themselves, and we are so very good at helping ourselves.

But, if this is our dream we will never feel secure. We will never have enough. There will always be the possibility that another king will arise and take our place. We will always look with suspicion and fear on those unexpected visitors from the East who come to our country with questionable theology and strange customs.

But, we are not stuck with Herod’s dream. Our story for today tells us that God has given us a greater dream. It based not upon what we can control. It’s based upon what God does for us.

Just as God created the stars in the sky, so God has created the hope of salvation for all people. It is a hope that shines even when we find ourselves in exile and the ruins of broken dreams and broken buildings are scattered all around us.

Are you afraid of what the coming year might bring? The light of God’s presence offers a hope that is greater than your fears.

THE DREAM OF THE MAGI

I suggest that we need to follow the dream of the Magi instead of following Herod's dream. I suggest that we learn to look up instead of about. I suggest that we dare to believe that God's ability to save is stronger than the ability of men and women to destroy.

In lowly Bethlehem the Magi found a small child, but they knew that appearances could be deceiving. The star shone bright over that little home, and the Bible tells us that the Wise Men from the East rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

They knew. God's promise was for the whole world. And so they worshipped that little boy who was God's own Son.

Herod is alive today in anyone or anything that leads us away from the overwhelming joy that can be ours in Christ Jesus. It is the classic battle between light and dark, hope and despair. The great psychologist, Abraham Maslow wrote about this conflict between the forces of joy and fear. He wrote,

"Every human being has both sets of forces within. One set clings to safety and defensiveness, hanging on to the past, afraid to grow, afraid to take chances, afraid to jeopardize what one already has, afraid of independence and freedom. The other set of forces impels one forward toward wholeness and uniqueness of self, toward confidence in the face of the world."

The gift of the Magi to us is the gift of their example. They chose the forces of joy over the forces of fear. They listened to God's dream. They said "no" to Herod and "yes" to Jesus.

OUR DREAM

In the same way we must say "no" to the painful past and "yes" to the joyful future. This is the gift of the Magi to us, and if we can receive their gift 2007 will be a happy and prosperous year no matter what happens.

And if we cannot accept their gift, then no matter how many good things come into our life, they will be overshadowed by the negative ruminations of a fearful mind.

In his poem “For the Time Being,” W. H. Auden described the post Christmas mood. He wrote, “Well, so that is that ... we’ve gotten through Christmas once again, perhaps in spite of ourselves ...” but it’s over now.

“Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility. So, it’s back to the old world we left behind for just a bit on Christmas Eve, and perhaps that makes us weary.

And yet the Vision will not entirely go away. We almost wish it would To those who have seen the child, however dimly, however incredulously, the time being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.”

In our Bible studies this past week we noted that the story of the Magi often raises more questions than it answers. Who were these strangers from the East? Were they kings or magicians or astrologers? Were there three, one for each gift or were there more? Why were they able to see the star, the light of God’s presence when no one else seemed to notice?

In a way, the mystery of this story gives it power. It is a story about joy and wonder. It is a story about the capacity to dream. And the joy and wonder continues to capture our imagination long after the Christmas season passes.

That is good news. God is with us here and now. In the routine time after the holiday season there is still a reason to have hope and strain toward the future.

What about you?

Will you dare to look for the Savior in the coming year?

Will you dare to follow the light of hope instead of giving in to the temptation of despair and fear?

The message of Epiphany is this, “God himself is with us.”

No matter what happens this year that promise remains the same.

And so my friends I leave you this morning with the words of the prophet,
“Arise, shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has come
upon you.”

Amen.