



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Lighten Up
Rev. Louise Rogers

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Isaiah 60:1-6

*“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
“Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.*

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be

born. *“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:*

“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.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Today we begin the season of Epiphany. An epiphany is the manifestation or unveiling of what is not obvious to the naked eye. We begin with the epiphany of the Magi coming to see the newborn king. We read about their travels in Matthew’s gospel and we sing about their adventure in the hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” The melody sounds like traveling music from the orient. But you might be surprised to learn that John Henry Hopkins, Jr. wrote the song and he lived in Williamsport, Pennsylvania back in 1857. Mr. Hopkins tapped artistic license in telling the story in his hymn. He drew on the gospel account but consider:

“three kings.” Undoubtedly there would have been more than three visitors in the caravan to cross the desert. The three refers to the gifts they gave out of their treasure chest. Gold, a gift for one to be a king, frankincense for one who would grow to stand between the people and God as their priest. Myrrh is so strange to give a baby, as it is a spice used to embalm a body. Yet this is a foreshadowing of Jesus taking the sins of the world upon his death. The visitors were not kings either, although this may be a reference to the Isaiah passage and the kings coming to the light. The foreigners were magi, wise men or sages, religious experts probably from Persia. Classical sources show them advising kings, performing religious rituals, watching the stars, and interpreting dreams. In studying the stars they identified the brilliant star in the East, so amazing and dazzling that they climbed on their animals and started out to find the new king. Now if we cross out the “creative parts” of the title, what we are left with are the words, We Are. Some immediately think of the Penn State cheer. But, truly this reflects where we are, here, waiting for our own epiphany or revelation from God.

The hymn shifts us from rejoicing at God’s coming among us to reflecting on what it means for us to live with God in our world. Christmas was the time we sang Silent Night and gathered for a time of calm and unity. If we are honest, we will admit that what we find in our current world and national climate is the realization that people everywhere must tolerate deep ideological divides. We live in a time when compromise is often seen as a negative – as a weakness. Truth telling is in

short supply. We live in a time of party and tribal purity, in which the classic “us” verses “them” dominates.

The dialog around this takes many forms but sounds something like this:

“We” are the good people, the ones with the right way of thinking and acting.

“They” are the bad people, the ones with a wrong way of thinking and acting.

“They” constitute a threat and everything about “them” is suspect. Last Wednesday we saw this position tragically played out in our nation’s capital with the ensuing violence, anger, fear and even death. Sadly, we stand a people divided.

When Jesus was born the nations were divided too. King Herod was in power and as the king he was paranoid, power hungry and willing to kill anyone who might usurp his power. On the other side, the Hebrew people had developed a strong ethic of internal unity against all who were “other.” This came from an attempt to maintain the purity of their faith; the intrusion of outsiders into their realm threatened the integrity of what they saw as God’s demand. Therefore, they divided the world into “us” and “them” – the people of Israel on the one hand verses all others, whom they termed “gentiles.” That includes all of us. Many clashes and conflicts testify to these divisions from Herod’s time up to today.

Into this deep conflict rode the magi searching for the newborn king. The magi assumed the king would be living in the palace in Jerusalem. Herod was stunned to hear another king was living in his territory. This was

the first he heard about God's actions in his land. Herod was a cunning leader who did not immediately send the magi home. Rather, he greeted the magi, encouraged them to go to the newborn king and then to return to him so he could worship the baby king himself. So off went the magi with Herod's blessing and the prophets of old to direct them to Bethlehem. There they found the Holy family; they fell down and worshiped the newborn king. These foreigners came into the midst of the chosen people and claimed the new way. Warned in a dream they did not return to Herod but went home a different way. The story of wise men paying homage to the Christ child marks the beginning of the new understanding. It is the story of a God of all people, a God of unity, a God who moves his people beyond the trap of "us" against "them."

The Epiphany gospel story is a powerful symbol of something critically important as we consider our faith in the understanding of whom and what God is. We move from "us" versus "them" to a clearer view that Jesus is Lord of Lord and King of Kings.

The magi in Matthew's gospel remind us once more that our task is to go home and live another way from the cruel way we find around us. We are called to embrace and teach the view that all people are children of God, everyone is worthy of dignity and respect. The same respect we show to our brothers and sisters. The epistle reminds us that there is no gentile, no "other" who exists beyond the circle of God's love. It reminds us that divisiveness like we experience so often is not consistent with the values of God.

We are. We are on the receiving end of God's mission. Without Him we would be wallowing in the darkness. We are now living with God's Light shining into our sin-darkened hearts. Without Him we would be driven to despair in our hopelessness. We are now living in the brightness of the dawn of Christ's resurrection from the grave. Christ's way home is a path filled with kingdom building as Howard Thurman¹ guides us; our path is "to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoners, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people and to make music in the heart." That's the message of the Magi – that Jesus the Christ has come, the light in the darkness. He has come to save a whole world of sons and daughters of Adam. He has come to save us. Now we are the magi to carry the light and lighten up the world, one word, one action, one act of love at a time. Because we too worship the King!

¹ Thurman, The work of Christmas, *Progressive Christianity*, December 2014.



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