

Isaiah 60: 1-5

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
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.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
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.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice.*

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Arise, Shine, For Thy Light Has Come

An Epiphany! Don't you love that word?

The moment when suddenly you see. When the light bulb flashes on! When what had been confusion, is now clear. A Eureka moment! (*fingersnap*) Epiphany!

So I love this Epiphany Sunday that the church gives us after Christmas. A day and a season when we say:

Oh, *that's* who Jesus is....
Oh, that's how the old and new fit together...
Oh, that's how Love can look, where it can be found...
Oh, that's what something new could mean in my life...
Oh! (*fingersnap*)

On Epiphany Sunday, it's clear: there isn't any assumption that we should always have known all about God already, about how the disparate pieces of our lives will come together, about Love's shape and place in our lives today.

At Epiphany we confirm: there are still new discoveries, more deepening of our understanding, which can be ours. An Epiphany! (*fingersnap*). Oh, *now* I understand more fully...

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On Epiphany Sunday we tell the story of the Wise Men, who have been looking, looking, looking for a child "born King of the Jews." Understandably -- wisely, one could say -- they go to King Herod's palace for directions, a rather logical location to inquire about a newborn king, one would surmise.

Even these wise and brave ones – wise enough to discern changes in the galaxies, brave enough to risk a long trip to a distant land – these wise and brave ones, as wise and brave as many here in these pews, still receive today the gift a new epiphany: a whole new understanding, when they see the new king in a barn, with peasant parents.

Oh! (*fingersnap*) Our answers may not be in the palaces. Jesus is a different kind of king than we'd expected, the kind dreamed of in our Psalm: he's a king who gives justice for the poor of the people, who shall save the children of the needy.

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For each of us humans, there is much we don't understand. There are many days when life seems like a small, square plastic puzzle, with nine little squares that can be moved around within it, each little square with some marking on it, so that if we put each piece in its right place, there will be a completed picture. But at first we may not be able to even tell what the final picture is supposed. Even when we can see that our goal is to make a face, we find that the ear is where the nose should be. Until finally, the pieces move into place, and I see! (*fingersnap*)

Epiphanies are rewarding, in part, because they are unexpected clarity, after a time in the dense fog. As we read in the Old Testament from Isaiah:

Darkness shall cover the earth,
And thick clouds the peoples;
But the Lord will arise and shine upon you,
And his glory – his presence –
will be seen over you.

Epiphanies also can be rewarding because they're a long time coming. I have to patiently keep reworking the little plastic puzzle and resist the urge to just yank out the misplaced piece, with the ear on it, and shove it back in where it belongs.

Carl Scovel sent me this week an excerpt from a book written by Mary Catherine Bateson, daughter of Margaret Mead, in which one chapter is called "Longitudinal Epiphanies." It's the notion that epiphanies are not defined solely by the suddenness with which they occur – the *fingersnap* - because epiphanies sometimes result from the long, repeated practice that enables the new insight.

Here's what I mean. In this sanctuary we engage in repeated rituals – not only in words we use, and in our prayer book. Weekly we repeat the Lord's Prayer. Weekly

we read from the Psalms. Weekly we hear Bible stories; we tell them again and again, like today's story of the Wise Men.

We also engage in ritual physical activities – creating muscle memory. Sunday after Sunday you pull open the heavy door outside, and make your way up the aisle toward a pew. There are repeated times you rise or sit in the service. Repeated times you come forward with open palms, to receive a communion wafer. Repeated gestures you use to dip the wafer in the silver chalice, or sip from the cup.

Through our ritual liturgical practices, in the repetition, over time, can come the epiphanies: a word heard afresh, a sacrament more deeply understood. “Oh *now* I see...”

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Suzanne Guthrie wrote a book on prayer called Grace's Window. In an essay on “Stargazers” and the Magi, she describes one of the happiest times in her life. As a young housewife she gathered with other women every Wednesday morning for a time of prayer and reflection, their children nearby with a babysitter. Each of these women, at home raising children, committed to a “Rule of Life” that they wrote together, principles that would guide them daily: prayer, study, and mission beyond their own doors.

The forms varied. Prayer might be only ten minutes a day for a busy mother of toddlers, but she'd commit to fitting that in. Mission might be helping a friend once a week, by listening on the phone. But all of them committed to daily prayer and action, and met weekly to assess and confess how they were doing with their practice; there was accountability, and support. They read the Bible and writings of the saints, to help them on the way.

And from this practice, said Guthrie, the time came for each of them, “that a star rose in the East, and we knew we had to go and follow, at whatever cost (39).” She writes:

How did the magi know to follow the star rising in the East? Perhaps the wise men followed the star after a lifetime of watching – scanning the sky, reading the movements of the stars, tracking the paths of constellations and the courses of planets. Maybe they collected chests full of maps and charts of earth and sea and sky. They knew from ancient and esoteric books that a particular new star would announce the birth of a Messiah. After a lifetime of preparing themselves with the study of wisdom, of meditation and prayer, with interpreting dreams and visions and watching the sky, the magi perceived the dawn of a holy light. Consulting with one another, they recognized what it was, and what to do, and when and where to go.

I want to live my life, says Guthrie, like the magi. I want to *perceive* the movement of divine light upon the horizon. I want to live a dedicated life, so that even for one moment in my life I, too, may see the glory of the Lord face to face." (40)

Because how wonderful, how wonderful our epiphanies can be: when we understand God in a new way, face to face, more clearly, in a new light.

The Wise Men, says Matthew, were "overwhelmed with joy" we they finally saw the baby lying in the manger. Isaiah says that when the presence of the Lord shines upon us, when we walk by God's light, then, in the Hebrew words:

As you behold, you will glow;
Your heart will throb and thrill –

"As you behold, you will glow; Your heart will throb and thrill!" These are not glib promises to a gullible group. It's the hard-won promise of Isaiah to people who have been through hell: who have been exiled to a distant land by their conquerors; who have returned to their homeland with gladness but now must complete the huge task of rebuilding their Temple. They face the reality of that large, long-term project

Might we know of what they speak? A people who have had hard, hard times; who are exhausted by conflict; who have tried to sustain their worship, but still feel distant from what had been, their old familiar and beloved weekly worship routine?

And now, though a new day may be dawning, they also see that the work of rebuilding will take time.

To the ancient Hebrews and to us, the prophetic words are these:

Look Up! Don't miss the dawn!
Arise, Shine, for thy light has come!

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We don't *make* the new light, but we *are* asked to notice it: the star that is rising. And then we're asked to radiate the light that shines on us. "Arise, shine, for our light *has* come."

As a church we can shine out to one another, when we receive the light that shines on us, and reflect it back to each other, caring graciously for one another in beloved community.

We'll shine out to the city, when we receive the love light that shines on us, and reflect it back to the city, caring for the city's people, the ones the psalmist calls the "poor" and the "children of the needy."

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Where is the new light dawning in your life? The new light that may be your morning star, just over the horizon now?

I do not know where each of you is now on your journey. As it was for the Wise men, there are many seasons in the journey.

This may be the season of preparation for you -- looking at the maps and charts -- a season of study and prayer, so you hone your ability to see more deeply.

It might be the season of watching and waiting, or of lifting your eyes to notice what already lies on your horizon. You'll lift your eyes up from the ground where they're so accustomed to rest, because you've assumed your season of darkness can't end yet.

Perhaps this is your season to consult with other wise ones who watch, because discernment is always better done alongside others. Did you see that new star, too? What could it mean? Or once you've seen light radiating, you may need to simply bask in God's love, gaining strength from it.

For some, this will be the season of courage, heeding some new call, leaving behind what you've known and rising to follow a star to an unknown place.

Whatever the season for you, take the light within you, in the place of greatest darkness in your life, so that over time, you can reflect that light back to others.

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Friends, watch for the Epiphany --the new way for you to see God. As close as a baby who reaches for your finger to hold it tight. As mighty as the stars that travel the night skies.

Amen.