

Isaiah 60:1-6

*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,
because the abundance of the sea shall be
brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.*

*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

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*"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."'*

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

This is the Word of the Lord...

I often write out my sermons by hand in a spiral bound notebook before I type it up later. The challenge in this is that I can't always read what I wrote. The beauty in this is that I can easily look back at what I've previously written.

At the end of November, I had to start a new notebook. A quick glance back includes a quote from *Sweet Home Alabama*, a deep desire for my very own lawn ornament Christmas dragon, a plea that 'yes, Mary knew', and a tutorial on the days of yore when if one bulb was removed from a string of lights – they all went out.

More important than the outtakes and illustrations are the points:

- What we do to the least of these, we do to the Son of God;
- We can't serve both God and the empire;
- God is asking us to be the hope in this world;
- And, we are called to reflect the light in the night, to help others who cannot see.

Sunday after Sunday we follow the order of the story, and on Advent 1 it begins again which means that the weeks after Christmas day escalate quickly. If we followed the lectionary today, we'd be well beyond the wise ones visiting a 2 year old, and instead be on the banks of the River Jordan witnessing the Holy Spirit descend upon a recently baptized 30 year old Jesus.

That escalated quickly.

We who gather around lectionary calendars and Scriptures decided too quickly – and so we're stubbornly taking a pause here to dabble in Epiphany – to hold onto a little stardust and holiday.

Not surprisingly, my reason for wanting to do so is quite similar to why I love that 11' wing-span, inflatable Christmas dragon so much – I want to hold onto Christmas - the joy and the peace and the love and the hope... probably the hope most of all.

Because re-entry is hard.

The real world is hard.

Right now... even the air hurts.

Globally, nationally, and locally – *Joy to the World* seems to have shifted into an ominous, minor key as we lament for a world with threats hanging in the air, and a nation of deep division and insecurities. Locally, our hearts break for our high school and middle school youth who lost a classmate to depression last week. And to all who know the family... our prayers are with you.

Please, if you find yourself struggling, reach out to me or Pastor Mark or Cathay or any of the adults who are sitting around you. We meant what we said when you were baptized – we love you.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims:

*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.*

You will note that this is future tense – because at that point in time, when Isaiah was written, things were bleak.

We've had a good time this Advent and Christmas – *All is calm, all is bright...* - that's how the song goes anyway. But when Jesus was born, things were not calm, and with the exception of the angels and the star in the east – things were not bright.

Our kings made their way to the nativity in the back of the Sanctuary, but the ones in Matthew had to avoid an egomaniacal tyrant with a fragile ego. Scripture tells us they were warned and went to their country by another road. Scripture also tells us that Herod's revenge was taken out on the innocents:

*'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more'* (v. 18).

Christmas is not sweet and nice.

It has been a harrowing time from the very beginning. Because the world wasn't as it should be... and it still isn't.

And so:

We bring our gifts – faith and hope. Love and courage.
Courage and Love.

This year, Easter arrives a little early – it's on April 1st. Lent begins on Valentine's Day. We will be in good order, and step away from Epiphany by then. Things will escalate quickly.

Today we break the bread – the body of Christ; and drink the cup of salvation. It is the greatest gift – the Son of God fully entering this brutal world – and suffering for it – all so that we can have the ultimate gift – eternal life.

What gift can we bring in return?

Theologian and Civil Rights leader, Howard Thurman calls it the work of Christmas:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

A friend of mine described Communion as not just a sacrament, but as practice for what we are called to do out in the world. In this Sanctuary, we take the cup and the bread, so that we know how to give bread to others, how to quench the thirst of others.

The gifts of God, for the people of God; so that the people of God, can pass on the gifts of God.

Thanks be to God...

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.