

Good Morning! Let us pray... *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ our Lord. May the words of my mouth & the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight...rock & redeemer of us all. Amen.*

Epiphany —“Arise, Shine!”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas Greetings! I pray that there have been moments of hope, love, joy & peace as you've spent time with family and friends. I dearly hope there has been all kinds of joy in your heart. And that any tears that have come have been accompanied by the gift of sweet memories of hope, love, joy, and peace present in your lives.

In this season of turning, the prophet again calls out to us... the gospel writer shares what happened...and we gather to remember all these things so that the story lives on... this story of hope, love, joy, and peace...there is much to celebrate! Arise Shine, your light has come... for you, and you, and you, and you! God has broken into the midst of the chaos, yet again, and invites us to receive and respond to this great gift of light and love!

A quick note about **the why** of these writings...Isaiah 60 is written to those Israelites who have returned from exile...they lived in another country and have returned home to life challenges, chaos and the challenge of rebuilding what has been devastated. If you have lived through fire, flood, war, evacuation, extended stays away from home health, due to mold remediation or even bankruptcy or domestic violence, then you can appreciate the challenges Isaiah's people have experienced.

The gospel writer, too, is writing to a community of followers of Jesus after the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed (70ce) by the Roman EMPIRE. There is difficulty within the traditional religious groups and the Jesus followers. And Matthew has undertaken the task of giving identity to the people as followers of Jesus through his account of who Jesus is and why Jesus is important. You can get a sense of this as Matthew's gospel begins with the claim of Jesus the Messiah and concludes with Jesus' mission complete and the commissioning of the Next mission leaders (apostles) ... to go to the ends of the earth sharing the story of God's love revealed in God's agent, Jesus.

You can almost make a case that the days of Isaiah and Metthew have a lot in common with our world today. Which is why Epiphany Sunday is important for us... so that we remember God is at work, even now, breaking in with Light and love for us.

The metaphor/sign of hope is Light... and the STAR is the key sign...a light to the nations...who follow to find the gift of God in the baby, Jesus.
The remarkable thing about those who follow the star... they don't know what they will find...yet they go...giving of themselves and their lives...to follow.

The star provides the gift of revelation to the wise ones who traveled great distances to offer their gifts to the newborn Christ-child. They were responding to the gift first given to them. Did you notice when the Wise Ones offered their gifts... 'After arriving and seeing the child with his mother, they knelt down and paid him homage' (v11). They worshipped FIRST, and then offered their gifts of tribute... gifts not for a baby, but for one who is Lord of all, worthy of praise, and will suffer rejection and death.

For me, what matters most is that, through a star in the sky, God called the magi to a journey to a far-away land in which the truth would be revealed to them. And they responded...were willing to risk it all – willing to go on this journey...a faith journey...following a Star...and finding God in the most unlikely place.

Oh, if all of us had a star! A sign that leads us toward an even deeper journey with God. *[read Ann Weems poem here]*

Well, as we commemorate the arrival of the wise ones, remember their offerings, and receive their gift of faith in the journey, it is a delight to offer to you a gift.
It is a simple gift, a paper reminder that symbolizes God's generosity in our lives, a STAR GIFT.

A star gift is simply a star-shaped piece of brightly colored paper with a word printed on it. Every person receives a star gift and is asked to reflect on that word for the coming year. Simply ponder what significance this word might have in their lives, and how God might be speaking to you through the word; may be even use it to lead your prayers through this year. *[begin passing stars from back to front]*

Try to resist the temptation to pick through, to put back, or to trade words, but trust that the right word will find you... that God will put it into your hands.

In fact...

The word that finds you may be a perfect fit. If so, celebrate it and live it more fully.

The word that finds you may offer encouragement or a challenge you need.

If so, let it shape you in the days, weeks, and months to come.

The word that finds you may make you want to resist or even reject it.

If so, prayerfully consider how come and remain open to what this word will teach you.

Place your STAR GIFT in a place you will encounter it:

- tape your word to your bathroom mirror, put it with a magnet on your fridge,

- put it in your wallet or car or
- onto your nightstands or by your favorite prayer place.

The key thing is that, when you see it, you will be reminded to look to God and to follow the star that is guiding you. Truly, may it be a reminder to: Arise! Shine! The Lights on the Christmas Tree may be gone, but your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Alleluia! --- May it be so. So be it. AMEN.

A note to those who could not be present for this worship moment:
If you would like to know more about Star Gifts or if you would like for Pastor Pat to say a prayer for you and to randomly draw a Star Gift word for you from the basket, please contact the church office and let Kenna or Pastor Pat know.

As I was preparing for this Epiphany Sunday, I came across this poem by Ann Weens, published in her book "Kneeling in Bethlehem" and called *Star Giving*:

What I'd really like to give you for Christmas
 is a star. . . .
 Brilliance in a package,
 something you could keep in the pocket of your jeans
 or in the pocket of your being.
 Something to take out in times of darkness,
 something that would never snuff out or tarnish,
 something you could hold in your hand,
 something for wonderment,
 something for pondering,
 something that would remind you of
 what Christmas has always meant:
 God's Advent Light into the darkness of this world.
 But stars are only God's for giving,
 and I must be content to give you words and wishes and
 packages without stars.
 But I can wish you life as radiant as the Star
 that announced the Christ Child's coming,
 and as filled with awe as the shepherds who stood
 beneath its light.
 And I can pass on to you the love that has been given to me,
 ignited countless times by others
 who have knelt in Bethlehem's light.
 Perhaps, if you ask, God will give you a star.

Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Amazon KINDLE book location 728 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).