

Epiphany —“Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light!” 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 safe time with family. I dearly hope there have 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 and poured out in your lives.

In this season of turning, a new year, a new government, a renewed hope in overcoming the coronavirus, and new members in our music program...the prophet Isaiah once again calls out to us... the gospel writer shares what happened...and we tune in online to remember all these things so that the story lives on... this story of finding hope, love, joy, and peace with guidance of a wondrous star to find the source and reveal...the story of Light Come to us! 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 to 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 have lived in another country and now have returned home to a difficult life, chaos, and the challenge of rebuilding what has been devastated. If you have lived through fire, flood, war, evacuation, experienced extended stays away from home, quarantined due to health issues, 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. 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 even make a case that the days of Isaiah and Matthew have a lot in common with our world today. THIS 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 primary metaphor/sign of hope is Light (Isaiah proclaims it; Matthew speaks of it)... and the STAR is the key or focal point to guide us to the perfect LIGHT...The STAR is a light to the nations...represented by the MAGI – the Wise Ones- who follow the Star to find the gift of Love Come Down from God - the baby, Jesus.

Here are several remarkable things about those who were 'Guided to Thy Perfect Light'...

First, they know not what they will find...yet they go...giving of themselves and their lives...to follow *in wonder and curiosity*. We heard Edie read for us "they saw a star in the East." It's a simple statement, but there is obviously more to the story. All kinds of people may have seen the star, but these wise men didn't simply look up and say "Oh hey, look at that cool star up there," and then go on with their lives as many probably did. These wise men saw not only the star itself but also the message of hope and promise to which it pointed. They looked upon that star with vision rather than with mere eyesight. Without wonder and curiosity, they would likely have stayed right where they were and gone about their lives as if nothing had happened. And they would have missed Jesus altogether.

The important questions for reflection are: How often do we do that? How often do we fail to notice the signs and wonders that are all around us? How have we missed opportunities to see/follow/be guided to Thy Perfect Light?

This year, there was a celestial phenomenon that occurred on December 21st...the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Astronomers use the word [conjunction](#) to describe meetings of planets and other objects on our sky's dome. They use the term [great conjunction](#) to describe meetings of Jupiter and Saturn, which are the two biggest worlds in our solar system.¹ Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions happen every 20 years; the last one was in the year 2000. But these conjunctions aren't all created equal. The 2020 great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn will be the closest since 1623 and the closest observable since 1226! 2020's extra-close Jupiter-Saturn conjunction won't be matched again until the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction of March 15, 2080.

Because of the rare brightness, observability and the proximity to Christmas, some have wondered ...even named the occurrence the 'Bethlehem Star'. There is a possibility, according to Astronomer Michael Molnar and the most promising of which is an alignment of Jupiter, Saturn, the moon and the sun in the constellation of Aries on April 17, 6 B.C. This conjunction fits with the story for a few reasons. First, this conjunction happened in the early morning hours, which aligns with the Gospel's description of the Star of Bethlehem as a rising morning star. The Magi also lost sight of the star, before seeing it come to rest in the place where baby Jesus lay in the stable.² Did you look for this? Did you wonder? If not, why not?

I remember a Snoopy cartoon in which Charlie Brown is sitting on a hillside, looking up at the night sky. Lucy comes along and looks up with him. Charlie Brown says to her "You know what I think? I think that there must be a tiny star out there that is my star. And, as I am alone here on earth among millions of people that tiny star is out there alone among millions and millions of stars." Lucy looks down at Charlie Brown and then back up at the sky and Charlie Brown turns to her saying "Does that make any sense, Lucy? Do you think it means anything?" "Certainly," Lucy replies as

¹ Posted by Deborah Byrd and Bruce McClure in Astronomy Essentials, Dec 21, 2020. Retrieved from <https://earthsky.org/astronomy-essentials/great-jupiter-saturn-conjunction-dec-21-2020>

² What was the Star of Bethlehem? By Jonathan O'Callaghan, All About Space magazine. Dec 21, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.space.com/star-of-bethlehem>

she turns and begins to walk away, “It means you’re cracking up Charlie Brown!”³

Friends, I pray our lives are characterized more by the openhearted wonder of Charlie Brown than by the cynicism of Lucy. Like the wise magi, let us come to Christ with a willingness to see beyond the practical realities of life to the possibilities surrounding us. Rather than approaching life with a “been there, done that, wasn’t impressed” mentality, let us approach life with wonder and curiosity that we might be open to experience the holy in our midst.

The Second remarkable thing about those who followed the star is a *willingness to engage with what was happening*. When they saw the star shining in the night sky, they didn’t just notice it and say, “Someone really ought to find out what that’s all about.” No, these men observed the star, they studied it, and they determined that it meant something. But they didn’t stop there; they saw in the star a call to go on a journey, a call to go deeper, a call to go forth into the world. So they laid aside their books, their telescopes, and their maps of the heavenly bodies; they moved beyond their theoretical speculations, and they headed out on a journey. These wise men were wise enough to recognize that there was something more out there to experience, something more out there to discover, something more out there to learn.

The third thing I find remarkable is their *adoration and worship, which includes the offering of gifts*. The scriptures say that when they came into the house and saw the child and his mother they knelt down and worshiped him, offering him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Worship and adoration are truly the appropriate response to an encounter with Christ. But worship of God is about more than kneeling down and honoring God with our words. It is about more than wearing a t-shirt saying ‘I’m a Christian’. It is about more than coming to church on Sunday morning. This story shows us that the giving of our gifts in response to God is an integral part of authentic worship.

Much has been made of the particular gifts the wise men brought. It has been suggested that the wise men gave the most precious things they had to give: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and we are often invited to consider what precious gifts we might have to offer. On a humorous note, an anonymous writer has speculated about what would have happened if the three wise men had actually been wise 'Methodist' women. Perhaps you have heard this before: This author suggests that the wise women "would have asked for directions sooner, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a hot dish, and brought practical gifts."

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh may seem impractical gifts for a small child, but these gifts are symbolic of who this child is: the king of kings, the messiah, who came and lived and died and rose again that we might have life abundant and life eternal. These gifts likely provided the family with the resources they needed to escape Herod's wrath and survive their time as refugees in Egypt. What this story reveals to us is that seeing Jesus called forth an attitude of adoration and worship from these men, and they felt compelled to offer something of themselves – something of value – in return.

Sir Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." This year as we reflect upon what it means to say 'Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light', may our lives be characterized with an attitude of adoration and worship made visible in the giving of our gifts. Let us not give them out of guilt but out of love. Let us not give them because we should, but because we can do nothing less. Let us not be content to merely worship the baby in the manger, but to worship and adore the one he grew to become, and to offer our gifts to further the holy work he began in this world.

Lastly, what I also find remarkable about these wise ones is *their discernment and responsiveness to the Spirit*. When they encountered Christ these wise magi were able to discern the trickery of Herod, they were able to sense the goodness and the vulnerability of Jesus and his family, and they were willing to heed the warning they received in their dreams. As a result, they chose not to return to Herod and be drawn into

his schemes. They found another way home. In addition, Jesus and his family had time to escape before Herod issued his murderous orders to find the child he felt was a threat to his power.

Let us reflect: How often do we hang on to our attitudes and opinions and perspectives and plans no matter what? How often do we pay more attention to the powerful and mighty than to the most vulnerable in our midst? How often do we allow ourselves to get caught up in the agenda and the plans of others without taking time to discern what God would have us do? How often do we ignore the instincts that tell us we ought to find another way?

This year as we reflect upon what it means to say 'Guide us to Thy Perfect Light', may our lives be characterized by openness and responsiveness to the nudging of the Spirit, so that we may be discerning of who God would have us be and of what God would have us do at this time, in this world. In this way, we, too, can play our part in God's kingdom work of light and love.

May the light of Christ shine upon us and shine forth from us that we may walk in the light of the Lord.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God, you have given to us the greatest gift, your word made flesh, your love incarnate, your son, our savior Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Your light brings healing and wholeness to a broken and hurting world, it brings peace and reconciliation among the nations, it brings aid and comfort to those who are most vulnerable, it brings freedom and release to all who are held captive. It brings light and life to your people on earth.

Let the light of your love shine in the midst of the darkness, helping us to see the way you would have us go. By your light guide our steps that we may have courage to follow where you lead us. And may the lives we live,

the choices we make, and the gifts we offer be a reflection of your light so that others may see in us signs of your amazing love.

Gracious God, in this year ahead, help us to discern your will for our lives, and to discern the gifts you would have us bring, that with open hearts and transparent lives, we give you all glory, honor and praise. All this we pray in the name of Jesus whom we worship and adore. Amen.