

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

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“Star Catchers”

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Our first and second testament readings are Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12, let’s lean in and listen with fresh ears that we might hear anew God’s word for us this day.

Scripture

Isaiah 60:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

The Ingathering of the Dispersed

60 Arise, shine, for your light has come,

and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

² 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.

³ Nations shall come to your light

and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴ 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 in their nurses’ arms.

⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant;

your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]

because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you;

the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

⁶ 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 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

The Visit of the Magi

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi^[a] from the east

came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we

observed his star in the east^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard

this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests

and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told

him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘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^[d] my people Israel.' ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of the Lord / **Thanks be to God**

Let us pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.
Come as the fire and burn,
Come as the wind and cleanse,
Come as the light and reveal,
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:
That the words of my mouth
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

Sermon

2024 – A Year that never was...and never will be again.
The reality of that statement is that it can be said of any point in our lives.
This hour of worship – An hour that never was...and never will be again.
This day – A day that never was...and never will be again.
This week – A week that never was...and never will be again.
The interactions we have with people – they are encounters that never were...and never will be again.

I first learned to think this way when I attended a summer camp and the director for the week posed that phrase to us in his opening remarks.
He said, “This week is a week that never was and never will be again.”
He quickly followed, “How will you choose to make the most of this week?”

Each hour – Each day – Each week – Each month – Each interaction in our lives are moments in which we can answer this question...“How will we choose to make the most of the moments we’re given?”

So, today – on this 1st Sunday in the New Year 2024 – it seems only fitting that we’re here and that we make a concerted effort to create space in our lives in which we can be still and listen for God’s still small voice.

This is important since we in the church are entering a liturgical season that far too often feels like “down time” in the church year. This time from Christmas to Lent can feel as if we’re simply marking time off the calendar as we wait for another grand celebration. Whether it’s because we suffer from holiday fatigue or influenced by winter’s gloomy weather – the season of Epiphany can go by unnoticed and unheralded.

The name itself “Epiphany” means “Manifestation.”

It is a reminder for us that light manifests itself in the seeming darkness of despairing times. It is a time for us to be reminded that God reveals God’s self in Jesus the Christ and that God’s glory is seen in Jesus.

Even the parament colors of Epiphany are important for a church. (Paraments are those table coverings you see adorning church chancels & Communion tables.)

Epiphany is denoted by the color white – which designates it as one of our days of celebration, reminding us that Christ’s light has come into the world; and that it is a time of glory, victory and celebration.

The Sundays after Epiphany until Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday are denoted by the color Green – which symbolizes growth.

Throughout Epiphany (and really the whole of our Christian faith) we are given the chance to grow into a fuller realization of Christ’s nature as God’s Son.

Epiphany is all about light – God’s light – entering our darkness in Jesus the Christ.

Epiphany is about our darkness being shattered as we allow God’s revelation into our lives.

One definition I’ve heard of Epiphany – “[it is] a shining forth of light into our lives which helps us gain clearer direction.”

Maybe that’s why Epiphany is often depicted as a light bulb going off over one’s head.

The Magi teach us about Epiphany.

They followed a star and when they arrived their darkness was shattered by so much more than merely the light of a star.

When they saw the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with **joy** (Matthew 1:10).

After sharing their gifts, we are told, they were, “warned in a dream not to return to Herod, [so they] left for their own country by another road” (Matthew 1:12).

As they encountered God's light of life, their lives were changed... they became overwhelmed with joy – couldn't we stand to have more joy in our lives? they realized their current life's journey was not on a path they needed to be on...they encountered the light and made mid-course corrections.

I like how W.H. Auden puts it in his "Christmas Oratorio."

Auden portrays the plight of three modern wise men drawn by that star...to a place where "knowledge but increases vertigo."

Auden has the three (the scientist, the historian and the social scientist) exclaim respectively of their encounter with this star,

"to discover how to be truthful now...,"

"to discover how to be living now," and

"to discover how to be loving now...,"

then finally all together, "to discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star."

Why do we follow this same star some 2000 years later?

What do we need to learn this year about our life and our faith?

What do we need to learn about our humanity as we follow the divine?

What do we need to receive from God so that we might grow?

How do we learn what God is trying to teach us?

I believe something as simple as fireworks can help us answer these questions.

If you've ever watched fireworks at an amusement park, sporting event, Fourth of July or New Year's Eve celebration, then you know that fireworks have a special and beautiful magic all their own.

We've all experienced the "oohing" and "aahing" over the color bursts across a clear night sky.

A good show is simply amazing.

I love watching as children try to reach out and touch or better yet catch the falling colors.

Now, I'm not scientist, though a Google search of fireworks has taught me the basics of fireworks 101 – enough to be knowledgeable yet not enough to be an expert.

Your basic aerial firework is comprised of a **shell** that consists of four parts:

- **Container** - Usually pasted paper and string formed into a cylinder
- **Stars** - Spheres, cubes or cylinders of a sparkler-like composition
- **Bursting charge** – Firecracker-like charge at the center of the shell
- **Fuse** - Provides a time delay so the shell explodes at the right altitude

Located just below the shell is a small cylinder that contains what's called "the lifting charge."

All these things work together in just the right way to cause the beautiful array of colors which cascade through the sky.

And this is how it works:

The **shell** is launched from a **mortar**, (a short steel pipe) by the **lifting charge** of black powder that explodes in the pipe to launch the shell. When the lifting charge fires to launch the shell, it lights the shell's fuse. The shell's fuse burns while the shell rises to its correct altitude, and then ignites the bursting charge inside the firework so it explodes.

All this works together so that we get the chance to see what we love – those colors that fall through the sky. Those colors we love to “ooh” and “aah” over are called “Stars.” Stars come in all shapes and sizes, though most are about the size of a pea or a dime. The stars are poured into the tube and then surrounded by black powder. When the firework explodes it ignites the outside of the stars, which begin to burn with bright showers of sparks. The explosion throws the stars in all directions, thereby giving us a sphere of sparkling light.

In just a few moments, all of us will have the chance to receive a word from God.

In the spirit of today's celebration, it comes to us in the form of a star.

We will pass baskets of these stars down the rows and you will reach in and help yourself to a star gift – (no peeking...just reach in and grab) – in a sense you will be a star catcher today.

Today it's about stopping long enough to receive.

This is also very theological – for the natural order of things in God's realm is that God always gives first, and then we are invited to respond with our gifts and ourselves.

The wise men who traveled to offer their gifts were responding to the gift first given to them. They received God's gift then offered their gifts to God.

You could think of today as a tangible sign of God's presence in your life.

You could think of today as a chance to stop being busy – long enough to be still in God's presence to receive God's gifts.

Once you've received your gift, reflect on it.

What is the word?

What does it mean?

What might it be saying to you?

Why might this be the word you picked out of this basket from all the other words?

And don't just do it for the remainders of today's worship...keep reflecting throughout the year.

Take this star home and hang it up somewhere it can be seen every day.

By the door you use every day...Above your dining room table...On the dresser in your room...

Allow this word to speak to you throughout this year.

We could think of this as a serendipitous encounter with the Divine as we wonder what God might be trying to say to us in this simple word.

As the ushers come down front to pass out the star gifts, I ask that you remain open to this moment.

It could be poignant – as when a first year college student home on break chose the word *responsibility*.

It could seem a bit comical like when a choir director chooses the word *harmony*.

Or a pastor picks the word *faith* – *which actually happened* – to a pastor who is not me.

Keep in mind though that sometimes comedy can turn poignant as when that pastor who chose the word *faith* lived into a year with their congregation which was a roller-coaster year filled with heartbreaking crises and challenges that prompted parishioners to come to their office asking, “why does God allow such tragedies to occur?”

I invite our ushers to come forward – remember – no peeking!

[Pass out star gifts...once ushers have returned the gifts conclude with the following...]

Consider what you hold in your hand a gift from God.

And like any gift it can be received with joy or discarded and forgotten.

Will this paper star be lost in a coat pocket or purse bottom?

Will this word be considered an opportunity – a chance to reflect on how God speaks to God’s people?

Epiphany is celebrating God’s presence which breaks through to shine as light in darkness.

Epiphany is about being star catchers who allow “a shining forth of light into our lives which helps us gain clearer direction.”

Amen & Amen!