

Rise and Shine
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth
Isaiah 60: 1-6



“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.³ Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.⁴ “Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come

from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip.⁵ Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

I am very excited to experience the Fabulous Epiphany Brunch following worship today. I hope you are, too. I hear that it is pretty much the same every year, with a couple of variations in the menu and in the diabolical questions that Mel has prepared for us...but that's ok, because it's all new to me! I won't know if you've done it a hundred times, it will be my first, and I am sure I'll enjoy it! I will also understand if some of you are a bit less enthusiastic, because it is often the case that, when something is sooo familiar it becomes taken for granted, we may not even notice it's happening.

For example, we probably all brush our teeth every day, but how many of us notice the taste of the toothpaste?

, we probably all go through the motions of putting on our seatbelt before driving without thinking about it

, and if you're like me, you probably take it for granted that when you get in line at Acme or Key Food, your line will move the slowest!

Epiphany and the march of the kings/magi is one of those things for me, maybe you, too. I can count on wonderful pageantry, gaudy crowns, and a procession that ends with the giving of gifts at a manger. I don't have to think about it too much. It's just a thing of the season...but if I stop to really experience Epiphany, really think about it, I start to wonder:

- Why does Matthew tell us this story that takes the limelight away from Jesus?
- Who are these mysterious people who put Jesus in jeopardy and come bearing gifts?
- What's the point of the story?
- Why do we keep retelling it?

As I started digging around for some of those answers, I discovered that we don't really know much for certain about this story! What we do "know" comes from the song, We Three Kings!

- We don't know who these visitors were. We don't have any names for them.
- There is no archaeological evidence of them. There were Persian mystics who dabbled in astrology, but it's unclear if they ever traveled

to Bethlehem and we do not have any evidence that they had a conversation with King Herod.

- Of Herod we can say that he was a terrible puppet king who called for the death of young males during his reign.
- The gifts the Magi supposedly brought were wrought with symbolism that has been discussed and debated without conclusion
- The angel's message and escape of the Magi seems to be a literary device to move on from the Magi and onto the first family of Christmas, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

With all of this information up in the air, and a big party celebrating it in the offing following worship today, I wondered about Matthew's narrative, and what it could mean.

Enter our lectionary lesson from the Hebrew scriptures.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”

The prophet Isaiah (probably 3rd Isaiah), proclaimed these words of hope after Israel's time of exile in Babylon. The year was mid 500's BCE and King Darius (who had ascended to power by killing his predecessor and making up a story that that king was a Magi posing as a king!), Darius granted Israel passage back to their holy city. The return home was experienced as a wonderful thing and Isaiah cheered his people on, proclaiming that NOW they would be a light to the nations. He noted that

darkness (which comes and goes rapidly in the middle East) would envelope the nations that did not worship YHWH, and these foreigners, outsiders, non members of the community of faith, would turn to Jerusalem for comfort. They would see God's light shining forth from God's people. In their state of fear and confusion, they would turn to the light and come from all directions to be comforted by it. *"Thick darkness is over the peoples but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.4 Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip.5 Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come."*

Isaiah describes a day when the community of faith becomes a safe place for the people of the world who are scared, and alone, and searching for respite from the terror around them.

This is probably a good time to note that the author of Matthew often employs a literary device known as *typological fulfillment* to his narratives. To make his case for Jesus as the Messiah, he uses situations from the Hebrew scriptures to support his claim. They are "types" that resonate with his readers and help them to make the connections between the prophetic speech of the past and the glorious presence of Jesus in the

present. I would argue that these types would not hold up if they did not bear some truth to those of us who read Matthew's words today.

- Words of the struggle between the powers of this world and God's power to change a situation for the better, to deliver us from Exile
- Words about a people who live in fear, who are dispossessed of the riches of God's community.
- Words about a light of hope that shines beyond them and welcomes them to step into it.
- Words about their hearts being so glad with this hope that they bring gifts to the light that welcomes them in.
- Words about camels
- Words about gold and incense
- Words of a reconnecting and reconciling when all people gather in that light of God that shines beyond our political borders.

It sounds kind of familiar but in a new way. It sounds to me like we (The Briarcliff Congregational Church) are like Jerusalem. We are a relatively safe (open and affirming) and secure place in our version of that holy city. We have a sense of God's presence among us. We have the potential (and I dare say, the responsibility) to RISE AND SHINE AND GIVE GOD THE GLORY GLORY!

But like Israel, we don't shine for nothing!

We are here as a light of hope and serenity and healing for those who are dwelling in darkness. People who are homeless, people who may be facing

deportation this winter in ways that they have not feared in the past. Our political government has raised threat levels on people who are considered “outsiders”, “foreigners,” “aliens,” to the beloved community of the USA. People we know have loved one’s preparing to flee because they are not sure that they are welcome here or not. They are shrouded in darkness and dreaming of a light that will guide them to safety, guide them to a holy city where God’s presence will shine upon them and they will be protected. I would argue that the people who are homeless in our communities bear more resemblance to the Magi of Matthew’s story than the paper crowned kings who will swagger their way through many a pageant...if we pay attention to the typology Matthew is employing.

I’d like to show you that pageant before we adjourn to what we have become familiar with. Ifwould come forward, and if you take out your inserted version of *We Three Kings*, I invite you to sing with a new voice, experience with new eyes, Epiphany.

(a pageant unfolds as the song is sung. The verses are the same but the refrain has been slightly altered: O Star of wonder, star of night Star with royal beauty bright Westward leading, still proceeding Guide us to be holy light...People representing folks who are homeless come forward to a manger and upon arriving, receive: a scarf, a thermos of coffee, a hug)

Stars of wonder, stars of light, as we prepare to welcome our local Magi into our “city” during the month of March, let us work to make their coming a celebration that will leave them feeling safer, more loved, and shined upon with Jesus’ love. Amen.