

Call to Worship 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.**

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Hymn

Lord, the light of your love is shining

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1. Lord, the light of your love is shining
in the midst of the darkness, shining;
Jesus, Light of the World, shine upon us.
Set us free by the truth you now bring us.
Shine on me; shine on me.

Refrain

*Shine, Jesus, shine;
fill this land with the Father's glory;
blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow;
flood the nations with grace and mercy;
send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light!*

2. Lord, I come to your awesome presence,
from the shadows into your radiance;
by your blood I may enter your brightness.
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.
Shine on me; shine on me.

Refrain

3. As we gaze on your kingly brightness,
so our faces display your likeness,
ever changing from glory to glory;
mirrored here may our lives tell your story.
Shine on me; shine on me.

Refrain

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Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of light and life,
we praise you for the amazing depth of your creation
and the mysteries of the galaxies.
We praise you for the wonders of the earth around us
and for the Word made flesh in the child born in Bethlehem.
Open our hearts and minds in this time of worship.
Just as you led the magi by the star,
lead us by your Spirit beyond the limits of this world's expectations,
to the life where you make all things new
through Christ, our Morning Star.

**God of mercy and loving-kindness,
you sent Christ among us to be the light of the world
and reveal your love to all people.
Yet our sins hide the brightness of your light
that should shine through us.
Forgive us for wasting our gifts,
ignoring cries for justice,
and harming the earth you love.
In your mercy, cleanse us and make us new.**

God of light and life, we seek your wisdom to guide us into this new year.
Open our ears to your Word calling to us.
Open our eyes to your Word at work in the world.
Open our hearts to renew our commitment to follow Christ, your living Word. Amen.

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Assurance of Forgiveness

Be assured of God's love and forgiveness that shine for us in Christ Jesus.
As a new year unfolds, make a new beginning with God and with one another.
May the peace of Christ be with you all.

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Scripture Reading 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.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message In it for the long haul

Having been on flights just this week and anticipating a long flight for our next vacation, then having this passage about the magi as the scripture reading, this week has had me thinking about journeys. I have been very fortunate to be able to choose how I travel and where I travel. I have been to the Netherlands to visit family and to Mexico and Cuba for vacations. I have traveled by car, ship, and plane, and even did a little excursion by train once. I think many of you could come up with a few memories of your own trips, from day trips by boat or car to broader and vaster experiences.

Today we consider a journey written about in the Gospel account of Matthew regarding wise men. You will note that I did not say *three* wise men, even though we love to sing

We three kings of orient are as a staple at this time of year. The thought that there were three wise men or magi comes from the naming of the three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but Matthew never tells us how many wise men made this trek from the East.

And who were these guys anyway? Why are they in the story? These people had no understanding of God's promises about a Messiah. They are star gazers, likely astrologers who in curiosity follow what appears to be a star with significance, one they had not seen before. The story that follows the reading for today speaks about a slaughter of children two years and younger. The slaughter is the result of Herod's temper after the wise men skip out on returning to Herod to give him more information about the child the prophecies had spoken. It is because of this story that it is thought that the arrival of the wise men likely happened about two years after Jesus actual birth. So, the wise men would not have come upon a babe in a manger, but a curious two-year-old.

As with all the stories about the birth of Christ, these are stories handed down to us. Do we know any more than is written in these words? No, but through these words we are again reminded of God's expansive love for the world.

The mysterious and wonderful news of God with us is shared with the poor as it was shared with the shepherds. For them it was a story of joy and hope that would be told to all that would listen.

The birth of God with us is to be shared widely as it was shared with people from a far away land that had no ties to the Jewish faith. We have no idea whether or not their meeting Jesus as a child and their journey changed them. We have no further information about the wise men after they journey back to their homeland via a way that did not include having to deal with Herod.

Through this particular story of the wise men and the Messiah's birth we know that the information was shared with those who held dangerous positions of power that could have and tried to destroy God's inbreaking into the world through a child.

And there is that piece that we cannot ignore...God came as a vulnerable child. God chose to work through humanity to bring about the message of God's love. Even as I write this it seems so beyond comprehension. And I have had to think about this a lot this week, along with considering my journey of faith and why this person Jesus has made such an impact in my life. You see, I spent the last week with my children, and particularly my eldest son. None of my kids go to church or believe as I do. To my delight, my son sat and had conversations with me regarding faith. Not that I changed his mind about anything, but I was grateful that we got to talk. He listened and I listened. He questioned me and to be honest, I did not have any great answers. Yet these conversations are all part of my journey of faith. Rather than weaken my faith, conversations like this make me want to be better at articulating why God means something to me and possibly to others.

It turns out I am pretty crappy at sharing what it is about the Bible, Jesus, and faith that makes my life more meaningful. I just know that reading the words of scripture as set down in the Bible, with all the good, bad, and the ugly, has made a difference for me. I don't understand it all, but it has changed me in good and beautiful ways that I could not have anticipated. Like the wise men, I have journeyed long. They had a star, I have the Bible as my guiding light, the stories of Jesus are words that can and have transformed my being and trajectory. It truly has been a journey of faith that has had low times of serious questioning and anger to amazing moments of grace and hope.

For me, I have come to understand that faith is a journey for the long haul. It takes time for it to mature and grow, and it is a different journey for each person. We don't know what happened to the wise men after they left to go back home, but we are told that they had enough faith in this bright star, enough curiosity, to follow it where ever it led.

There is more to this story as well. The story of the wise men takes the story of God out of the hands of those who are the insiders to the faith and lets others in on God's action. So often we Christians think people have to look and act like us for them to have anything of value to share with us about our faith. Our churches are not as diverse as we would hope, but how often is it that we want others to conform to our way of thinking. Even our groups of friends tend to be like minded. It is so much easier to not have to constantly be treading through conversations and experiences that make us uncomfortable or might require that we change our perceptions and understanding. That takes effort on our part. We would prefer that people conform to our ways of worship and our understanding of God at work in the world. We feel most comfortable with those who live and think like us.

Yet we do not have to look far to find those who live vastly differently than we do. And when I say that I do so knowing that we each have our own biases about how people should live and be in the world. We don't understand other cultures and countries. We find it near impossible to comprehend the journeys that people are taking in the world today to find safety and security. We, who only have to move a few steps to get food from our refrigerator, cannot begin to know what it means that millions of people world wide do not have enough to eat, or are living in fear of bombs, have no electricity, and are watching as infrastructures are disintegrating before their eyes, that is if they have even had the privilege of knowing any security in their life times.

We are living in a time when there is so much diversity in thought and actual circumstances, in people and places, that we know we cannot comprehend it all. Yet God, through Jesus and in the stories handed down to us in scripture, has allowed us to see and know that God worked in all that diversity. From shepherds in a field, to a couple just trying to find shelter for a night, to wise men from an Eastern country, to power in a palace. God's story of grace and love is one for all people in all places.

May we be people open to however God is revealing God's self to us, to the church, and to the world. Let's choose to be part of this story of faith for the long haul and see what happens next for our own lives, that of the church, and in the world.

Epiphany is a time to be reminded to look with curiosity and wonder at our lives and the world. To hope for moments of clarity and understanding. Maybe these words from a poem called *For those Who Have Far to Travel, A blessing for Epiphany* written by Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace*, can help to open our hearts and minds to the wonder of God and the journey of that can transform us so that we can bring God's grace into the world anew through our living and loving.

If you could see
the journey whole,
you might never
undertake it,
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping,
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go,
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star

that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions,
beyond fatigue,
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know:
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again;
each promise becomes
part of the path,
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go

home by
another way.¹

Prayers of the People

God of all time and space,
as we gather in prayer, we recognize that our lives are but small details
in the vast expanse of your universe;
so we thank you for attending to the details of our lives.

We thank you for the year just past,
for walking through hard days and uncertainties with us,
and for the gifts of encouragement and friendship that cheered us.
Thank you for accomplishments in ministry and mission,
for generosity offered to those in need,
and for renewed commitment to gather together
to celebrate your presence with us.
As your Spirit guides us into the future,
Our hearts kneel before you, O God;
Receive our humble prayers.

The year just ending has held so many sorrows and challenges.
We remember dear ones who have died
and pray for those who look ahead in loneliness or sadness.

We pray for those who have faced challenges in health,
in their families or at work.

Support each one who needs you close by.

God of light and love,
as we face the year ahead, we are aware of tensions around us.
We seek your strength and guidance in each challenge we will face.
Draw near to each one who must confront changing circumstances
in their personal lives and all who feel overwhelmed by turmoil around the globe.

Guide those for whom new opportunities appear and choices must be made.

God of community and commitment,
we pray for wisdom and courage in the year ahead.
Strengthen us as a congregation to be a committed witness to your love.
Inspire our outreach to our community,
and make us effective citizens in these challenging times.
Guide leaders in our nation and in nations around the world
so that justice and peace may prevail,
resources to meet health and hunger needs are shared,

¹ Jan Richardson. [Epiphany: For Those Who Have Far to Travel « The Painted Prayerbook](#). Accessed January 4, 2024

and understanding and respect will grow among divided peoples.

Receive our humble prayers and encourage us onward
in the name of Jesus our Christ who taught us to pray, saying

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen

Invitation to the offering

Epiphany opens with the story of the Magi offering gifts to the newborn king.
Our gifts today and throughout the year honour
Jesus as Lord of our lives and Saviour of the world.
We may not bring gold, frankincense and myrrh,
but all our gifts are welcome to keep the light of Christ shining into the world.

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Hymn

Arise, your light has come

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|---|---|
| 1. Arise, your light is come!
The Spirit's call obey;
show forth the glory of your God
which shines on you today. | 2. Arise, your light is come!
Fling wide the prison door;
proclaim the captive's liberty,
good tidings to the poor. |
| 3. Arise, your light is come!
All you in sorrow born,
bind up the broken-hearted ones
and comfort those who mourn. | 4. Arise, your light is come!
The mountains burst in song!
Rise up like eagles on the wing,
God's power will make us strong. |

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Benediction

The season of Epiphany celebrates God's light breaking into the world
in Christ Jesus, and so:

May the light of God lead you,
the light of Christ embrace you,
and the light of the Holy Spirit enliven you
So that you know both hope and peace
this day and each coming day.

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