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Given at Christ Church Quaker Farms, Oxford, CT

Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

"Arise, shine; for your light has come!" †

Today we celebrate the 'Epiphany.' To be honest, the feast is not until Tuesday and it formally ends the 12 days of Christmas, but I wanted to celebrate and consider its importance with you *today*. In Greek, 'epiphany' is the 'shining upon,' the word literally means 'to make visible,' to 'enlighten.' It's the celebration of God's appearance and manifestation to the Gentiles and thus, to the entire world. And so, it is fitting that our Scriptures begin with that lovely passage from the prophet Isaiah: "Arise! Shine, for you light has come…" Notice this passage is not simply an invitation, but a command (in the imperative tense). The prophet is clear, those who stand in the light, by grace of God, have the responsibility not just to receive but to respond, they must 'shine.' Light has come into the world. But that light has not come to rescue a *chosen few*, it has come so many will be drawn out of the darkness and into the light. Remember the words of the prophet Amos (9.7), the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt also brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir. And Isaiah insists, "Nations shall come to your light, the kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isa 60.3).

There are many varied stories about the Magi, which we have come to know through early Christian folklore. Legend tells us there were three— probably Zoroastrians, who came from the East: Melchior, 'the eldest, the grey-haired King' who brought gold, which is a symbol of kingship. Caspar, the youngest, 'beardless, with the flush of youth,' who brought frankincense, a type of incense, symbolizing priesthood and wisdom. And Balthasar, a 'dark, swarthy, bearded man' who offered myrrh, a precious oil and symbol of healing. These gifts are symbolic of Christ's mission as King, wise priest, and healer. Many other stories exist within apocryphal (or non-Biblical) writings. I'd like to share a passage from one such beautiful text known as "The Revelation of the Magi." It comes to us from the 3rd Century and was recently discovered and translated from Syriac; Jesus is speaking to the Magi:

> 'And I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light whose light has shone in this world from the majesty of my Father, who has sent me to fulfill everything that was spoken about me to the entire world and in every land by unspeakable mysteries... in the same way as for you, as befits your faith, it was revealed to you about me.' [1]

Matthew's Gospel also emphasizes this universality with the story of the Magi. It stresses the inclusion of Gentiles along with Jews in the early Christian community (as does St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians). And today's Gospel includes examples of varying responses to Jesus. Contrast the Magi (who pay homage and 'adore' the newborn king), with the indifference of the chief priests and scribes (who are more concerned about their writings and rules and ancient rituals than what is actually happening around them), and with the fear and hatred of

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[1] Brent Landau, *The Revelation of the Magi (New York, 2010),* p 98.

Herod (who believes himself to be king and plans to kill his rival). They all represent human responses to Jesus— Those that choose to follow their own ways, those who want to blindly hold onto old ideas and beliefs, and those who accept and faithfully follow God, who humbly became one of us.

These visitors from the East came from places we tend to hold in derision, like Syria, Iraq, and Southern Russia. They were 'foreign' men who were willing to follow the star. The willingness of these men to follow God's light is what makes them *wise* and why they came to be known as the 'Wise Men.' Their willingness and openness led them to experience the Word made flesh— wisdom in infancy, strength in weakness, and majesty is humility.

The story of the Magi and The Epiphany teach us some important things…
These travelers from the East took a great chance in their journey. They lived with what was unfamiliar and entered into what was unknown, and experienced unexpected wonder and great change. The message to remember is that once one meets God, as the wise men did, nothing is ever the same again. For a variety of reasons, they were not able to continue on their old route, by the former road. They felt the presence of real danger and realized the evil that lay back behind them in the kingdom of Herod. So, they left by another route. Jesus Christ did not necessarily make their lives more comfortable.
Similarly, those who experience Christ today may not find things so comfortable. And, they will know great wonder and joy, and nothing will ever be the same again! As Christians, we cannot take that old route, remain on the old road, we are on a new journey and follow a new map. We are different, and our lives are ever-changing.

And that leads me back to that 'imperative' aspect of Epiphany. Near the end of the Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' disciples are in many ways compared to the star that so brightly shinned and guided the 'wise men' at the beginning of the story. Jesus tells his disciples, "*You* are the light of the world… let your light shine upon others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5.14-16). The disciples are called to 'shine,' as prophesied by Isaiah, they are to shine and reveal the light of Christ to others.
How do we reveal the Light? Do we, at Christ Church, shine with Christ's light in the world? In what ways and by what words & deeds are each of us the light of Christ?

Biblically based faith always has and always will have a global dimension to it. The God who chose Israel from among the nations and gave it its distinctive history as the 'chosen people' was and still is the God of the nations too (Jer 20.4). The promise to Abraham was that 'all the families of the Earth will be blessed through you' (Gen 12.3). In the book of Revelation (21.24; 22.2), the final apocalyptic vision shows the nations walking in the light of God's glory and sharing the fruit of the tree of life.[2] Our God is not geographical or restricted to a single place, like Jerusalem or Palestine, nor to a single people.

The story of the Magi reveals to us that the light of God has come for *all* people, and along with this enlightenment comes change, nothing will ever be the same again. Because of this, we are agents of God's light in this world… called to reflect the Light and Love of Christ upon others. That's the key to our understanding and truly celebrating Epiphany… so, "Arise and Shine!" ✝

[2] Eugene J. Peterson, *Run With the Horses* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.178.