

Sermon – Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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Grace Lutheran Church

Epiphany (transferred) – Year B

3 January 2021

“Rise and Shine”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. On December 21, at the end of the shortest day of the year, we were hoping to see the light. So it was that, an hour after sunset, I went outside and looked to the southwest. And saw nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. I saw clouds; clouds that kept me from seeing anything else. I was hoping, of course, to see the Bethlehem Star, as some referred to the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. These two giant planets hadn't been this closer together in the sky in nearly 400 years. And here in Chicago we couldn't even see it. The next night was clear, and the conjunction was supposed to be almost as close, almost as bright, as the previous night. My family and I stepped outside, looked to the southwest, and saw, well, a light that was sort of brighter than normal. Without binoculars or a telescope, left to our own vision, it was pretty neat but not all that much to look at. Frankly, I think I oversold it to my kids who seemed to think that such an astronomical event should appear more astronomical. But it was there, shining, just as it had been the night before, shining brightly even though it was blocked from our vision. Small or even unseen, the light still shines.
2. As the Magi journeyed to Jerusalem from the East, one wonders how many nights the real Bethlehem Star was obscured from their vision by clouds. If they came from Persia, it was likely a two-month journey by caravan. As students of the stars whose learning was likely a mix of astronomy and astrology, they seem to have been able to discern a star that most others

didn't notice. Even for them it must have been hard to see, to follow. Far from being a divine searchlight pointing directly at the manger, the star seems more like a needle in the heavenly haystack. It didn't even lead them at first to Bethlehem where the newborn king was resting, but to Jerusalem, where they found instead the puppet king, the petty tyrant Herod who styled himself "the Great." In spite of cloud cover or astronomical challenges or geopolitical realities, however, the light still shines. And the Magi, in faith, made the journey. Night after uncertain night, not knowing even quite what they were looking for, they followed the star.

3. As we enter the New Year, it seems that while the light may be shining brightly, the cloud cover is thick and heavy, the star pale and flickering. The pandemic didn't disappear with the turn of the calendar. Rolling out the vaccines has proven more difficult than previously predicted. The coronavirus is not loosening its grip on our lives anytime soon. In the midst of this, the coming week promises political drama as our democratic fabric is stretched thin. For many, perhaps for you, the financial fallout of these days is reaching a breaking point. For many, perhaps for you, the virus is not something out there causing inconvenience, but is inside you, seeking to do you damage. For many, the light might be harder to see. It might seem harder to keep going. We may not be exactly slouching towards Bethlehem, but it seems a hard and long walk these days. But the light still shines, beckoning us to keep putting one foot in front of the other.
4. The newborn king long ago sought by these wise ones from the East comes as a light to shine in the darkness. Make no mistake, his coming riles up the powers of darkness. Herod, sensing a threat to his thinly held power, is willing to do whatever he can to resist the coming of the light. He attempts to trick the Magi so he can get to the child. When that fails, he has his soldiers murder every child under the age of two in and around Bethlehem, but Joseph has already fled with his family to Egypt. Herod has no interest in the

- rise of a legitimate king of the Jews, not even one heralded by Gentile stargazers. Herod is willing to kill a baby, hundreds of babies, to hang onto a power that is nothing more than a loan from Rome. This is the depth of the sin into which Jesus is born. As the story unfolds, Herod will keep coming up. Actually, six different Herods appear in the New Testament. But, as the preacher James Howell points out, “Herod, Herod, and Herod are the same guy. All were egotistical, insecure, petty potentates, in bed with the Romans, and clueless about God.” In the face of such opposition, the light still shines.
5. Today, on this celebration of Epiphany, we celebrate the light of God made manifest within the darkness of this world. John proclaims in his prologue that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Matthew makes the poetry political. The light that is Jesus Christ is not so ethereal that it remains far off. It is a light enfleshed, situated both within our world and as a challenge to this world’s power. It is a light that promises to topple every tyrant even as it lifts the lowly out of oppression. Even death’s tyranny shall end. It is a light, full of grace and truth, that will not be dimmed, no matter how obscured to our sight. It is a light that arises specifically out of God’s promise to Israel and yet is also the opening of that promise to all people, echoing from Midian to Ephah, from Sheba to the shores of the sea. It is the light welcoming the world-weary home at the end of the long day ruled by sin and death, promising a new dawn and the epiphanic revelation that the king of grace, laid in a manger and nailed to a tree, is bringing an end to this world’s long night.
 6. This Christ, this child, is a star worth finding. Jesus is a Lord who calls us out of oppression and into freedom. His star is not one of fate, crossing us to our doom; it is a sign of grace, pointing to the cross that undoes our fate. God, as Dante wrote, is “the love that moves the stars.” We, by whatever name, are no longer star-crossed. This Jesus, who names and claims us, is now our destiny.

No matter the darkness, the light still shines. No matter how sin and death obscure his light in this world, we are called to follow.

7. We are called to follow, and to offer our best in homage of the Christ who has deigned to dwell with us. The Magi bring three gifts: gold, a gift for a king; frankincense to be lifted heavenward, a gift for a God; and myrrh, a gift to prepare body for burial. The gifts of the Magi proclaim the identity of Christ, God become human to die for our sake and salvation. But they are also gifts precious in and of themselves. These star-followers traverse afar for the specific purpose of worshipping Jesus and giving him their best. These are gifts of worth, chosen with purpose. They walked through the night, day after day, just so they could kneel before him and give him these gifts. On this Epiphany, we are invited to bring our best. Not to coax the Christ into coming. Not to bargain a better deal, as Herod did with Rome. No, we are invited to give our best because God has come to claim what has always belonged to God, and that is everything. We give our best to God – our worship and adoration, our time, talent, and treasure – to profess our praise of the God who has come among us; who shines in our darkness; who is found in the visage of those he rules not with terror but with love. In the Incarnation, God becomes lowly, needy. It is in such places that God is still found today. We follow the light of Christ into the needs of our neighbors. We travel through the clouds of night to stand with the suffering, the oppressed, the poor. And we give our best that their lives would be better.

8. We have journeyed from one year to another, but we still have a ways to go. Then again, the Christ child is present with us even now, right where we are. The night is long, and the clouds are deep. But the light still shines. Let us go, find him, and worship him. Let us give our best to the One who has given everything for us. Let us kneel and pay him homage, and worship him as we kneel at the feet of those in need. For it is there, in these neighbors, that we

will see Christ in this world. It is there, in these, that he will show his glory to us. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.