

Isaiah 60:1-6

60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

60:2 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.

60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

60:4 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 on their nurses' arms.

60:5 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.

60:6 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

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 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."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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 my people Israel.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 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.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by

night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Proclamation of the Word

This Wednesday January 6 is Epiphany which we celebrate in worship today just a few days early. Epiphany is the celebration of the Revelation of Christ to the whole world through the first Gentiles who came to worship at his throne, a manger bed.

I never heard of Epiphany growing up, or maybe did not pay attention, until I was in Seminary. Most of us in the Western church do not make a big deal of it. But around the world this Wednesday many of our brothers and sisters will celebrate with more passion than we celebrate Christmas, Jesus' birth, the Nativity.

Camels will parade through streets of New York as those from Eastern Christian Traditions gather. Christians will do the same in Poland. The 12th Night after Christmas is Epiphany Eve based on the 12 Days of Christmas. Even Shakespeare borrowed the term "Twelfth Night." In other parts of the world on the night before Epiphany, children place shoes outside for gifts to arrive in the night to mimic the three wise men in places like Mexico. In Louisiana and Brazil Epiphany marks the beginning of the Carnival season culminating with Mardi Gras and a King Cake representing Christ the King right before the season of Lent. You see, Epiphany is all around us.

What is most important to remember about Epiphany is this: the light of Christ shines in the world as the wise men from the east followed a star and came to worship him. With Jesus' birth a new force awakens when people recognize that Jesus is the Father's Son. Jesus is the fullest revelation of God in human form. God came to guide us in life, death, and life everlasting. Jesus is Good News in the flesh. This verse in the letter to 2 Timothy sums its meaning up this way:

And now God has made all of this plain to us by the appearing [epiphaneia] of Christ Jesus, our Savior. God broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News (2 Timothy 1:10).

And it all starts with following a star, seeking God in the darkness of night. Wise men and women, children and youth also seek Him in the light of day and even in the face of our brother, our sister, our neighbor. In our technologically sophisticated world, we may imagine that watching for signs in the heavens is primitive, illogical, but spiritually sensitive people have always known that God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all the stars, can use anything in the creation to point, to guide, to give meaning. God works through dreams, too. Dreams guided the magi and Joseph. Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod is after Jesus which leads them to flee to Egypt. Seekers like these wise men pay attention to what God is doing. God works through their spiritual sensitivities to bring them to a manger bed.

If God can draw Zoroastrian priests to kneel and worship at the feet of Jesus, then God who is sovereign works in the many paths that bring others to recognize his generous love. The coming Jesus shows a God who pours out His life in self-giving love. Why does God reveal God's self through Jesus? Grace. Grace.

The previous verse from the Letter of Timothy reads,

For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time-to show us his grace through Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:9)

God, the Father, chooses to reveal himself to show us his grace. So if we want to know God, we must turn our eyes to Jesus. In his words and deeds, and most of all in his sacrificial death, he reveals God to us. Therefore, we have been saved to live out that Good News. Timothy writes that we are to "live a holy life" not because we are holy ourselves, but God is holy and will use us for His purposes. If God can use an out of the way stable and a manger filled with feed, God can use you and me to reveal his grace shown first to us through Jesus. Saved people serve. (Repeat)

So how will you see God's signs and serve his purposes in this new year? (PAUSE)

If we want to know God, we must turn our eyes to Jesus. We must seek Him and pay attention to what God is doing.

Our second and third graders will be learning about Jesus as they learn to read and enjoy the Bible together.

Our eighth graders will begin their Confirmation journey today. They will seek Jesus by learning together about what they believe and hopefully, profess their owned faith with the support of Covenant partners, teachers, and parents.

Others will commit to study and seek together with other Christians in a Sunday Bridge class, Bible Study, SALT group.

Others give their time and their voice in our music ministry. The gift of music sews seeds of faith and grace as we practice the songs of faith.

Others will begin officer training next Sunday as they commit to study, serve, and lead our congregation in the faith.

Some of you will commit to new habits in this new year that will help you practice your faith- Bible reading, serving neighbors through a local mission ministry, forgiving someone, and seeking the face of Christ in each one you meet.

Today, you have been given a star to guide you in this new year. You picked it, not by chance, but because God will reveal to you its meaning as you live your life attending to what God through the Holy Spirit is showing you. Consider this your Epiphany gift. We are all out of frankincense, gold, and myrrh.

I shared in my Window article about when we did this a couple of years ago. Chuck Cruickshank would regularly update me at the church doors or in passing during the week as to how God was revealing new things to him. Chuck picked the word, “venture.” At the time he was mourning the loss of his dear wife, Betty. I imagine he had no idea about what new ventures lay ahead as he adjusted to life without his partner of more than 60 years. But little by little things started to change and happen. Chuck would report in as to what God was doing with him. He sold a house, bought a new home, made new friends and met neighbors. He was able to let go of the old to allow the new to happen. Trusting in God’s grace to guide, comfort, and direct him, Chuck’s path became clear. Thank you, Chuck, for sharing your star word and how God showed you new things with it.

That year I drew the word, “lightheartedness” in a very difficult time personally for me. I laughed when I read it thinking, “This cannot be right.” I was not in a very lighthearted place in my life. But I taped it to my computer screen so that each day, I would be open to the joy God might have for me each day. Over time, I did feel more lighthearted. God gifted me with not just the word, but the experience. It was not by chance, but by being attentive to that word in my daily life asking God to help me live into it, to share it, to enjoy it. This verse from Isaiah became real to me, “Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice...” (Isaiah 60:5) In this way the “word became flesh” in my life. That word became real. It was exactly what I needed that year.

Look at the word you have in your hands. I invite you to ponder this word today and each day. Ask God to help you see what he is showing you. Pray over this word. Talk about it at the dinner table with your family or a friend. Seek its meaning. And if you would like, I would love to hear what new thing God is doing in your life. Share what you are learning. Give witness to the star word that God has placed in your hands.

I hope you, too, will find that God is revealing a new thing in your life. God will awaken a new force in your life through the power of the Holy Spirit. God is drawing you into his presence just like those wise men. May you will kneel in his presence or in your heart and worship, the King of Heaven and Earth revealed to us in Jesus the Christ-child, **the** Word made flesh. I know God will show you the way forward as you seek him daily in this new year. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church