

Rising and Shining

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

January 7, 2024

Well, here we are. Christmas has come...and gone. And, yes, a new year has begun. But if we're honest, it feels a lot like the last one. I observe a pervading sense of pessimism and even foreboding. Much that was forced to the corners of our minds during the season of celebration has returned.

Yesterday, as our family began to pack up our Christmas decorations for another year, I thought of W. H. Auden's poetic summary of this bleak midwinter season.

Auden writes:

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --
To love all our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again,
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility.
Once again we have sent Him away.*

The truth is that I am haunted by Auden's words. Seen the vision. Sent him away. Seems sensible. After all, it's now back to the "real world," the one we left behind—if we were lucky—for a few distracted December days.

Which is why our scriptures for today might surprise you. Just when the nights seem darkest and the days seem shortest, we are reading and singing and praying and preaching all about light and stars and

radiance and breaking dawns. Today, the church insists on Epiphany. Dictionaries tell us the word means a striking revelation or a sudden insight. But this is the crucial component—epiphanies always come as a gift.

On Epiphany in 2008 at Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, I received a gift. I was ordained as a minister of word and sacrament. That morning, I made promises intended to set the course for my ministry. Those promises included the vow that I would, "in my own life, seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love my neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world." If you are an ordained elder, deacon, or minister, you have made that same promise. And perhaps like me, you remember the deep breath you took before answering, "I will." It felt, and it still feels, like a serious commitment, a weighty responsibility.

Follow Jesus.

Love Neighbors.

Work for Reconciliation.

These are promises that I have sincerely tried, and often failed, to keep. Thank God for grace. They are also promises that have particular consequence for people of Christian faith at the outset of this year.

I've always loved sharing my ordination anniversary with the Day of Epiphany, the day when we remember that group of sages, wise men, whose diligent search for God's promise took them far from the comforts of their home, on an unexpected journey to an unlikely place. Not Indianapolis, but Bethlehem. A story of redemption and new possibilities.

It's the day when followers of Jesus insist on looking for light despite the shadows that surround us. We find that light in the words and actions of those who follow Jesus, love neighbors, and work for reconciliation, those who do it in a wide array of often-unacknowledged ways. Protecting the vulnerable. Speaking the truth. Befriending the lonely. Listening deeply. Choosing tenderness and compassion over retribution and anger. We have to remember where to look.

Despite the provocations of a fearful king with terrifyingly violent plans, the sages kept their eyes on the star. They knew where to look for light. Yesterday, a friend sent me a long message that ended with the question, "So, are we doomed?" I thought about that jarring proposition over my first cup of coffee.

I took my time, but eventually, I replied. "Well, it is Epiphany and my ordination anniversary. So, I guess I'm vocationally obligated to look for light today. It's out there."

We have to know where to look. For those sages seeking God's promise, the glimmer of distant hope gave them the courage to journey on, to journey through, to keep looking, to keep seeking and searching. For the prophet Isaiah, writing to exiles recently returned to a bombed-out city, it was a vision of future hope despite present despair.

The magi and the prophet have the same charge. The time has come for rising and shining.

I love what my friend MaryAnn McKibben Dana has written about this passage from the Prophet Isaiah. She writes, "If we shine at all, isn't it because we are shined upon? We aren't the lamps; we are the mirrors. I recently attended a worship service in which the leader of the service lit votive candles and placed them on a long sheet of aluminum foil. The foil made the candles brighter, but make no mistake: without the flame itself, the whole thing was nothing but a waste of Reynolds Wrap."

The call of every follower of Jesus Christ is to reflect, to magnify, the light of God; the call of the Church is to be a prism through which the light of God is distributed to the world. We do not create the light. As with every epiphany, it comes as gift. Our call is to share it, to reflect it. As we consider the call of our church in the year ahead, here is a question to keep in heart and mind: how can we magnify God's light in our community, in our city, in our state, in this, our time? How can we magnify God's light?

I think we do it by building a community worthy of the gospel—where all of God's children are invited to grow and stretch and love and serve. I think we do it by investing ourselves in God's mission taking place all around us, through us. I think we do it by committing ourselves to the difficult, life-changing work of deep relationship, where we share not just the joy of celebration but the pain of grief as well.

After all, the promise of the prophet is honest in its assessment: darkness will come, and light too. Sounds like life to me. I have yet to meet anyone who has never encountered the darkness of life, and like you, I know many who have given in to its power, many who have become convinced that life in the real world is nothing but disappointment and struggle, who have lost the will to rise and shine. So, are we doomed?

Well, here is the thing about light—the smallest amount pierces even the deepest darkness. Most of us learn this truth as children. I remember as a young child (I was maybe five years old), I brought my parents together to give them news, an announcement. I told them that I would now prefer to leave the overhead lights and both lamps on in my room while I slept each night. It was a big decision, but I had considered it carefully and decided this was the best way to keep the darkness, that also brought the fear, out. My parents patiently explained that it would probably be too much light and that I would have trouble sleeping. So, I protested. I begged. I pleaded. I became more and more fearful

as the hour approached bedtime and the sun went down. That first night, as he was putting me to bed, my father stood in the room with me. He shut the door, and he turned out the light—I was terrified!

Dad, are you still there?

But my father is a wise man, and he demonstrated a universal truth that night. He walked out of the room, turned on the hallway light, and left my bedroom door slightly cracked open. Only the smallest sliver of light came into the room, but it was enough, enough to banish the darkness and my fear. Remember this Epiphany: It only takes a little light to overcome the deepest darkness.

This year, there will be more than enough opportunity to contribute to the noise, to contribute to the heat, the friction, the despair, the anger, the darkness.

What if instead you asked yourself: *How can I reflect just a little more of God's light into the darkness? How can I make things just a little easier for somebody else? How, every day, can I follow the Star, the vision, the child, the Savior?*

Hope and courage are faith's answer to times of darkness and fear. They insist on a different path forward, a path toward nothing less than the reconciliation of the world. So, keep looking for the light. Keep making it more visible by your words and your actions. So much depends on this.

Happy Epiphany, Second Church. Let's lean into the light. Amen.