

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for Epiphany, the sixth day of January in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. It is based on the lectionary texts below. You will find at places it is quite specific to our people in Tontogany. As you read, please ponder your own people who have lead you to the Light of Christ.

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.

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

72:1 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

72:2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

72:3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

72:4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

72:5 May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

72:6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

72:7 In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

72:10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

72:11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

72:12 For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

72:13 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.

72:14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Ephesians 3:1-12

3:1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--

3:2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,

3:3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,

3:4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.

3:5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

3:6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

3:7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.

3:8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,

3:9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;

3:10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

3:11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

3:12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

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.

In our Bible stories for today light appears;
nations are called to bow;
and the wisdom of God is made known through the life of the church.

We know from Luke's Gospel that the news of the boundless riches of Christ was given first to some dusty shepherds
and now in Matthew's story—
to people so foreign we can't quite settle on who they were.
"Magi", the Bible says.
Which is a basically short for magician or astrologer or wizard.
I suppose we prefer to call them kings because well, kings are pretty predictable.
Kings have wealth;
Kings get audiences with other kings;
Kings are stately and formal in their bows;
We can sort of fit kings into categories—
good kings/bad kings;
faithful kings/scoundrel kings;
peaceful kings/violent kings;
etc. etc.

Wizards on the other hand, make me a little nervous.
Who knows what they might do to change the predictable into the mysterious
or the impossible into the new normal
or the opaque into brilliant clarity.

Many English Bibles translate "magi" with 2 words: "wise men".
The Greek never uses the word "men" here.
They could very well have been women
or perhaps a mix of both women and men.
And the scriptures never use the number 3—
this is simply assumed by the naming of 3 gifts.
While I find all of this kind of fun to throw about,
none of it is really the point of today's story.

Maybe one point of today's story is that it is pretty hard to fit light into a box.

I am not saying it can't be done.

The church is rather notorious for trying just that.

But in this story the Light will not be boxed into one religious clan or one ethnic group or one nation.

Not even if that nation is ours.

Americans are notorious for assuming we are the keepers of the light.

I suppose in one sense, we are.

After all, we have been given grace upon grace upon grace; blessings after blessings after blessings; we have had the Scriptures in western languages—English, Spanish, French and German since the 1500's.

And so our responsibility to share the story is huge;

our responsibility to be aware that we are living in the Light everyday of our lives is a clear and present duty.

But do not think for a moment, my fellow Americans, that

the Light belongs to us

or is confined to us

or is somehow generated by our culture or constitution—

even if the constitution was thoughtfully prepared by Presbyterians.

No.

The light in this story is generated by the heart of God.

Its beam knows no bounds

and its rays shine forth for all to follow whether they hail from earthly nations or from heavenly courts.

Of course not everyone followed the star.

Herod preferred fear to faith and deception to worship.

He chose to lurk in the shadows of the Roman Empire, scared of little kids instead of fearing God.

But some did follow the light.

In this story the light of an oddly moving star transports equally odd astrologers to the life that was light (John 1:4); to the child Jesus.

John Philip Newell puts it this way:

The word 'epiphany' simply means 'showing' or 'shining forth.' Divine light shines forth from this Child. But it should not so much be understood as the appearance of God as the transference of God. The divine light that shines in the Child is not a foreign light to the earth. It is the Light at the heart of all life. It is the Light from which all things come. If somehow this Light were extracted from the universe, everything would cease to exist. So this is a story about the Light at the heart of everything, the Light at the heart of you, the Light at the heart of me" (The Light Within All Life the Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell, Day 1, 2013).

Later in Matthew's gospel,

Jesus insists that the beams of God's light are shining through you:

Shortly after offering blessing for

the poor in spirit,

the mourners,

the meek,

the merciful,

the peacemakers and so on,

Jesus says "You are the light of the world.

A city on a hill cannot be hid.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel,
but on a lampstand
and it gives light to all in the house”
(Matthew 5:14-15).

And so it is that God has placed light in you.
And so it is that the beam of God’s light is shining through Tontogany Presbyterian.
And so it is that Paul insists in Ephesians 3 that it is through the church that the wisdom of God in its rich
variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.

Was God foolish or wise when God chose odd, traveling wizards to point us to the Light?
Was God foolish or wise when God chose you to point others to the Light?
Was God foolish or wise when God chose Tontogany Presbyterian to shine on this corner for
1century, 5 decades, 7 years, 4 months and 2 days?
The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose you dear friends.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose
The chatter of Clara and the theology of Lila to shine in this place.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose the music of Jessann and Christian and Ian and Claire to bring light
to our hearts.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose Bess to return after a 45 year absence and blaze brightly,
if only for a moment.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose Miriam’s smile to shine among us for all of those years and many
more.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose the melodies of Janice and the harmonies of Tricia to brighten our
hearts.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose artists and craftsmen and scrap-bookers to fill this congregation
with lights and stables and fonts and photos illuminating for us the stories and faithfulness of God.

The wisdom of God in its rich variety chose Louie and Evelyn to beam from the back bench Sunday upon
Sunday upon Sunday upon Sunday.

Yes, Tontogany, God chose you to let the boundless light of Christ beam through the heart of this community of
faith,
all the way up to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.

God chose you to point them to Jesus Christ,
the Child,
the Monarch,
the Shepherd,
the Light;
the Anointed One in whom we live and move and have our being.

So here's the question:

If people followed you from day to day and month to month would they find the Christ Child?

Would they be overwhelmed with joy?

Would the boundless light of Christ meet them

in your face,

in your words,

in your actions,

in your love?

Shall we live as Herod lived fearful of the threat of little children encroaching on our castle wall?

Or shall we live as the Anointed One of Psalm 72

defending the cause of the poor of the people...

delivering the needy when they call,

the poor and those who have no helper."

Shall we live as Miriam lived courageously climbing the steps of a city apartment building to offer nursing care to the poor and the fearful?

Shall we live as Janice lived remembering always the needs of the hungry?

Shall we live as Bess lived with tenderness toward children who had never heard of God's love?

Shall we live as Mary Sautter lived praying and singing and giving out grace?

Martin Luther said:

"If we Christians would join the Wise Men, we must close our eyes to all that glitters before the world and look rather on the despised and foolish things, help the poor, comfort the despised, and aid the neighbor in his need."

Blessed be the LORD God of Tontogany who alone does wondrous things.

Blessed be the glorious name of Jesus.

Blessed be the boundless light of the Christ Child who shines through you

in mystery, wisdom, justice and peace.

Now may the boundless light of Christ Jesus
Warm your hearts with compassion
Ignite your spirits with courage
And shine through your community with
Glory, Honor, Mystery and Peace
Here and right into the heavenly courts.