

Guided By a Star

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On January 5th, 2020

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

Happy New Year—and Merry 12th Day of Christmas!

Tomorrow begins Epiphany, the day and season of the year where we focus on how the Light that came at Christmas didn't stay confined to a specific people in a tiny geographic area in a corner of the Roman Empire, but went out to the whole world. The story of the wise men from the East following a star to bring their gifts to the infant—or perhaps by that point, toddler—Jesus, is the first indication of how God's Incarnate Love was meant not just for the people of Israel but also for the Gentiles—the goyim, or nations—literally the “people not like us.” As you hear the passage I'm about to read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, written 500 or more years before the birth of Jesus, the Christ, consider how it spoke first to a people who had returned from exile in Babylon. Then you might also wonder at how it functions to prefigure the birth of Christ and the visit of the sages from the East.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
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.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*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.
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.
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.*

Our second passage of scripture comes from Matthew's Gospel, the 2nd chapter beginning with the first verse. As you hear it read, think about what traits characterize the wise men from the East—and how they differ from the portrait of Herod and “all of Jerusalem with him.”

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all

Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*"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." ' "*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

At the four o'clock Children's service on Christmas Eve, those of us in attendance were treated to a wonderful skit that Pastor Susan created. No pressure, Susan, but it was the best one ever!

The skit featured three stars in the Bethlehem sky (her, Pastor Katie, and me) all wearing glittery star headgear and looking down on and relating events unfolding in the tiny town below. Big Star—that was me, I always wanted to be a big star—would pause every so often and ask, "What Should I Do?" And the kids and their parents and grandparents would shout out, "Shine the Way to Jesus." Pastor Katie played Shiny Star, who was enthusiastic and easily distracted like Dory in Finding Nemo. When she would pause and ask, "What Should I Do?" everyone would yell, "Just keep shining, just keep shining!" Pastor Susan played Shaky Star, who was older and dimmer and *born in a galaxy far, far away*. When she would pause and ask, grumpily, "What should I do?" the response was, "Shine a little brighter, shine a little brighter!" Those three admonitions—to shine the way to Jesus, just keep shining, and shine a little brighter—were meant, of course, not just for the stars, but for all of us in the crowd. It is not just stars, in the story or otherwise, that are called to shine. That's work all of are called to do.

I couldn't get that skit out of my mind when I was studying our passage from Isaiah in preparation for today. Because, after all, the text begins with the prophet's admonition to a group of returned exiles to "Arise and shine, because your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Isaiah doesn't pretend that there will be no difficulty or darkness, no hardship or distress. In fact, he affirms that darkness will cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you—and nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

What a hopeful word to the second generation of a people who, I am sure, had just about given up hope, having been disgraced and displaced, taken ignominiously from a land and a way of life that was familiar to them and deposited in a country that was not their own. While most of us, thank God, cannot relate to that experience in a literal way, we do know what is, to at least occasionally experience disappointment and discouragement.

As we enter a new decade, some if not all of us look at all that is unfolding around us—in our personal lives and our families, nationally and globally—with more than a little trepidation.

It can be all too easy to lose heart when the darkness seems to be closing in, or at least when uncertainty seems high. We may not have been uprooted from our homeland and carried away into exile, but grief and illness, the persistence of violence and injustice, wars and the possibility of wars, all have a way of unsettling us.

It is to an unsettled people that Isaiah brings his word of hope. What the prophet tells them—and us—is not just to *rise and shine* because our light has come and the glory—which C.S. Lewis translates as the weighty presence of God—has risen upon us. The prophet tells us to lift our eyes and look around—and then he says, *you will see and be radiant, and your heart shall thrill and rejoice.*

I love that. Lift up your eyes and look around and you will see and be radiant, and your heart shall thrill and rejoice.

It is possible in unsettled times to do nothing but look down or backwards. We keep our gaze downcast, trudging along, one foot after the other. We look back on the past ruefully, lamenting our past mistakes or wishing we could return to some former glory days. We can get caught up in ourselves, in our sense that we are all alone, that it is all up to us, that no one cares. We can ruminate and isolate, dwell in fear and anxiety. OR—and this really is a choice—we can ask for help. We can lift our eyes and look around and see and be radiant.

Since I last preached on Christmas Eve, and talked about how life is not perfect but it can be glorious, I've had the opportunity to lift my eyes and look around some.

Here is some of what I have seen. It hasn't all been sunshine and roses, sweetness and light. There is some darkness. Paying attention to the news can be unsettling in the best of times. In addition to the usual glut of news of human inhumanity, I am aware of the threat of an escalation of hostilities and the promise of revenge from Iran for the death of their general. I am aware that more than a quarter of the continent of Australia has been on fire. Images from the land down under seem apocalyptic and knowing that we have dear friends from our Camino travels there makes it seem a little closer to home. I've read reports of violence against Christians in Nigeria, including the execution of an entire bridal party. I've been the bedside of an Immanuel member in his last days of life, and with another family whose young adult son has troubling neurological issues. And, before I made my New Year's resolution to abstain from reading the comments on articles, I saw yet more evidence of the divisiveness and polarization in our own country.

I share that, not to be a downer, but simply to say that I know how hollow it can sound to say, Rise and Shine and look around you and see and be radiant. That being said, what better reason than the persistence of violence, disease, death, and disappointment is there for us to Shine and be radiant in the world. The light of Incarnate Love, the work of peace and justice, the care of friends and neighbors is more needed than ever now. We are people who are called to shine that light.

So let me tell you what else I have seen when I've lifted my eyes and looked around.

I've seen members of this community of faith reach out to hurting individuals and families in our midst. I've watched peoples' faces as they've talked about the ongoing impact in theirs and others lives of working in our Hypothermia shelter. I've beheld images of Australians cradling koalas and kangaroos hugging humans who saved them from fires. I've witnessed renewed dedication to

justice and caring for the earth. I've read a letter signed by leaders of twenty Christian denominations, including our own, cautioning us as people who follow Jesus against a rush to war. I've looked on as a wife, a daughter and a son tenderly cared for a dying husband and father.

I've also been to two weddings—one in Philadelphia last Saturday, where two thirty somethings with their whole lives ahead of them pledged to live in covenant love—and one, just yesterday, where a widow and a widower, entering their seventies, who had both cared for their spouses through debilitating illness and knew well the cost of loving another person in sickness and in health, committed themselves to each other and to God in marriage. Both couples' faces were radiant. They were glowing with love from the inside out.

While Judith and I were in Philadelphia, we also went to the National Liberty Museum. If you haven't discovered that little gem yet, I encourage you to go the next time you're up there. The museum is filled with images and artifacts that testify to the indomitability of the human spirit—the heroes and heroines who rushed into collapsing buildings to save lives; the people who spoke up for liberty and justice for all and not just for some; the individuals and families who sheltered Jews in the Holocaust; the men and women who have received the congressional medal of honor for acts of bravery on the battlefield. Nelson Mandela, Malala Youfsazi, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Vaclav Havel, and so many, many others were featured.

The centerpiece of the whole museum, from my point of view, is a towering twenty one foot tall Chiluly orange, red, and yellow glass sculpture that looks like a flame rising from the bottom floor up through a hole into the floor above. Encircling the sculpture on display is large ring of orange that if you hold onto it, lights up, from the inside out—and a multimedia presentation about freedom and the cost of freedom begins to play around you. Near the end, the presentation asks you to grab hold of the ring once more and commit to the cause of working for liberty and justice—and when you do, a light rises in the magnificent sculpture—until the whole thing is aglow, radiating with the light of human love and commitment.

It becomes clear while you are in that museum that the world needs people to be radiant like that—to glow from the inside out with the fire of love, kindness, mercy, and justice.

So today is also our annual star Sunday. You should have a yellow star in you bulletin. On that star, I'm going to ask you to put a word for the year—a word to guide you in the way of Jesus through 2020. In some churches, you come up and pick the words at random—and it's the luck or the providence of the draw. But here, we ask you to pray about the word. Have it be a word that you choose, with God's help, to guide you.

The one thing I want to ask you to do this year is to choose a word that will help you be radiant. To help radiate the way of Jesus out into the lives and world around you. Remember as you choose it and live into it the words of the great African-American mystic and proponent of social justice Howard Thurman: "Don't ask yourself what **the world needs**. Ask yourself what makes you **come alive**, and go do that, because what **the world needs** is **people who have come alive**."

In Jesus' name. Amen.