

“Arise and Shine!”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron
January 2, 2022 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – January 2, 2022

“We Three Kings” #173 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2, 5

V. 1 We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain moor and mountain
Following yonder star

Chorus

O star of wonder star of night
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading still proceeding
Guide us to Thy perfect light

V. 2 Born a King on Bethlehem's plain
Gold I bring to crown Him again
King forever ceasing never
Over us all to reign

Chorus

V. 5 Glorious now behold Him arise
King and God and sacrifice
Alleluia alleluia
Peals through the earth and skies

Chorus

John Henry Hopkins Jr.

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“What Star is This” #170 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2, 4

V. 1 What star is this with beams so bright
More lively than the noonday light
'Tis sent to announce a newborn King
Glad tiding of our God to bring

V. 2 'Til now fulfilled what God decreed
From Jacob shall a star proceed
And lo the Eastern sages stand
To read in heav'n and Lord's command

V. 4 To God the Father God the Son
And Holy Spirit Three in One
May every tongue and nation raise
An endless song of thankful praise

Charles Coffin | David Lantz III | George Ratcliffe Woodward | John Chandler | Michael Praetorius
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“Go Tell it on the Mountain” Chorus #133 in the Book of Praise (sung twice)

Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and ev'rywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born

John W. Work Jr.
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Scripture Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴Lift 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.
⁵Then 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.
⁶A 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

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.” ³ When King Herod heard

this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

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.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.” 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Christmas story has been shared. The old year has gone and the new year has begun. We have come through a year unlike one we have ever experienced before. The pandemic changed so much for us, and yet here we are, still together as a community of worship. We are still the family of God. We are still here to proclaim Jesus’ birth, celebrate his ministry and rejoice in his gift of life for all who love and follow him. It’s so good to know that while pretty much anything around us can change, or be changed, the basics remain. We are God’s children, disciples of Jesus, with the Holy Spirit living within and among us. The old saying is that we can always count on death and taxes. Well, we can count on a whole lot more than that, and actually, counting on death isn’t true for us. Death is a stepping stone for something greater – life!

Over the last year we have had the usual life experiences. We have known joy in connecting with friends and family in new and exciting ways, and we have mourned the passing of people we have loved dearly. We have watched as children have grown, the elderly have shared their wisdom, teachers have taught, students have learned, nurses have cared for the ill, first responders have reassured those in crisis, and the world has continued to spin on its axis. We’ve had new experiences, honed talents, and picked up new hobbies – I’m now somewhat obsessed with daily crossword puzzles. And as much as we’ve been frustrated, weary, and fed up with the ups and down of Covid numbers and restrictions, we’ve been able to find ways to connect and cope that have enriched our lives. Some old routines have been replaced by fresh new ideas and practices. Some have experienced growth in relationships that may not have

happened in pre-pandemic life. So, no matter the down side of the virus and its variants, there is reason for us to be thankful in all things. That's a good mindset for the beginning of a new year!

I've heard so many people say they feel weighed down by the restrictions under which we have been living for almost two years. It is indeed a heavy weight, not knowing what will happen next – hoping for improvement, disappointed when it doesn't come. Mental health concerns are rising at an alarming rate. The toll taken on health care workers and their families is relentless. Sometimes it is difficult to imagine a future when the weight is lifted and we can live free from the fear of contracting and spreading this world-wide illness.

But there is a future.

I don't know what it will look like. I don't know how long we will live with pandemic restrictions. But I do know those restrictions only limit our activities; they do not limit who we are.

They do not limit our capacity for love.

They do not limit our ability to share God's message of hope through the Gospel.

They do not limit the opportunities we have to shine God's light into the darkness of the world.

We do it differently than before, but we still do it.

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.

The glory of the Lord has indeed risen upon us. His glory has appeared, and will appear again. It can be understood that this section of Isaiah was written with regard to Israel's exile in Babylon. The prophet's words speak to an overall future for God's people rather than a particular situation or hardship. Babylon was a dark time for Israel so reference to a time when God's light of glory will shine to illumine the darkness would have been a powerful image for the people. We read this text at Epiphany partly because of the obvious reference to gold and frankincense, but also as a word of vision for the future. The darkness will be overcome by the light of God's coming. It is a look to the future whose advent we recognize in the beginning of John's Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. What has come into being...in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1, 3-5).*

A professor at a seminary in Egypt writes, "As before, a people walking in darkness have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2). In Isaiah 60, the people are called to respond to the shining of **their** light (that the light belongs to the people will be important). The people are called to rise up and shine, as a response to God's glory and their light arriving in their midst. The world has come into darkness. But God is doing something about it. God called to a downtrodden nation, in the midst of successive foreign rule by Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, to arise and let their light shine."¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-isaiah-601-6-9>

It sounds daunting. To live under that oppressive string of ruling nations and be called to get up and let their light shine might have sounded like too much. But Israel trusted in God. They messed up, repeatedly, but they trusted God to fulfil the divine promises. So being told to let their light shine in response to God's glory shining over them would have been a word of hope, a word of vision, a word that spoke of a better future.

In the movie "Captain Marvel", the protagonist is made aware of something within herself of which she knew nothing before. She simply knew she had something going on that was hard to control. There was something fighting to make itself known from within her, something that pushed her to fight for justice and defend the weak. She spends the movie trying to find the truth, trying to get a handle on herself and what is going on around her. Finally, in the movie's climax when she is faced with one who is wielding a seemingly stronger power over her and crushing the power within her, she lets her own power burst forth. And she shines. The light within her overcomes the power of the darkness she is facing. And she defeats it. She rises from having been pushed down and lets her light shine. She uses her super power for good, to use a common phrase. In the final showdown in the final Avengers movie, Captain Marvel shows up to lead the final fight against the darkness that is threatening to overtake the world, to oppress and control it, and as her light shines, others are empowered by it and the light overcomes the darkness for good.

We see this kind of imagery over and over again in entertainment media. Wherever good is finally able to overcome evil, light is often associated with the downtrodden, almost defeated hero to shine more brightly than its opponent can. We often see it in superhero movies as actual light, but it is also apparent in well-written novels. Tolkien was a master at this imagery.

We hear the image of light emerging over darkness referred to in news stories as we hear of people "seeing the light" and beginning to work toward justice and equality. When people come to faith in God, faith in Jesus, they often refer to a light that shone into their darkness to change their hearts. People that report near-death experiences usually speak of a light toward which they are drawn – the light of heaven which overcomes all darkness. Light is a powerful, powerful image when it comes to emerging from or illuminating darkness. And Isaiah captures it well when he calls the people to let their light shine in response to God's light that shines over them.

On Christmas Day I woke up earlier than everyone else, as I do most days. I practiced my usual routine of looking after the dogs, making a pot of coffee, and enjoying the quiet of the house while I was on my own. It was still dark-ish, and the overcast day contributed to it. I looked out at the rain and felt a little disheartened. It looked and felt so gloomy on such a special day. But then I poured my first coffee, turned on the tree and was rather moved by the scene. No other lights were on, so the lights from the tree really shone. They bounced off ornaments and were reflected in windows and other decorations. I sat with my coffee feeling quite reflective myself, remembering the story, remembering many years of sharing and celebrating the story in different ways. I spent some quiet time with my mom's memory, missing her in recalling her inimitable joy in watching my boys open their gifts. I remembered the year of our wedding, nine

days before Christmas, the first time I was ever away from my parents for Christmas Eve and Day because I was going to spend it with my new family. And the lights twinkled in the darkness of the gloomy morning. It didn't seem so gloomy though, as I watched the sparkling tree. The people I was missing that morning seemed to draw closer as I sat there with my coffee. It felt like I had emerged from the dark into the warm light of love and memory.

I now think, if those lights could brighten my heart and give me peace in the small space of my living room, I can only imagine what it must have been like for the Magi, seeing a new and brilliant star in the vast dark sky, and following it as it led them to the Child that would illuminate the world in the midst of its darkness.

*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...*

The Child of the starry light brings people together from near and far.
His birth draws in shepherds and angels.
His early childhood draws in the wise and educated from another nation, and culture.
His ministry draws in crowds of people.
His death is lonely.

And his resurrection gathers people in a new reality, and new truth, and a new hope.
This Child of light whose story has awakened in the world again to bring light to darkness and joy to despair has a super power beyond any hero the Marvel Cinematic Universe could come up with. His story, his life, gathers in people from every nation, draws them in, welcomes them in. And when we gather either in presence or in spirit, we are united by the Light that shines in the darkness, the Light that cannot be overcome – the Light that changes everything and makes everything new.

To use another thought from the seminary professor in Egypt, “We mark this day when nations recognize the Messiah, sent to bring near those who are far off, to rescue from sin, death and injustice, and to shine a light to the nations. Isaiah 60 must be about more for us than a prophecy of someone bringing gold and frankincense. Instead, it speaks of God’s longed for future, when a light shines out from God’s people that is so attractive that it cannot be ignored. Past wrongs will be made right through humble repentance and costly reparations. And the prophet foretells of a time when those who have been cast out and sent away will be welcomed back to the very center of what God is doing.”²

The Magi brought gifts for the Child:
Gold to crown him King,
Frankincense to worship him,
Myrrh as a foretelling of his death.
They brought gifts that told the story up to this point, and looked toward his story’s future destination. Their gifts remind us of all that Jesus is: King and God and sacrifice. They remind us God shone light into dark,

² Ibid.

Forgiveness into sin,
Life into death.

God continues to shine this Light in the world. All who see and follow it take on its illumination. All who take the Light into their hearts take on its brightness. And all who look upon those who carry the Light will see its brilliance through the hearts of the people who bathe in it, who have been moved from dark to light.

Arise, shine, for your light has come. As we begin a new year, may the Light that began to shine at Christmas, that shines without dimming even now, be your inspiration to shine from within it, and it from within you. Your light has come. His name is Jesus. Let him shine forth from you in the coming year and always. Amen.