

In What Ways Will We Arise and Shine Light?

Beloved friends, as we gather on this Epiphany Sunday morning, our scripture readings invite us to wonder: In what ways will we (each and together) arise and shine light? Let us pray.

God, be with us in this moment of contemplation. Guide our minds and our hearts toward new understandings of ways we might shine your love. And as you move in our hearts and in our minds; grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

I wonder: how are you like a star? What unique manifestation of the light of God's love shines out from you? How do you guide or teach others lessons about life?

And I wonder: how is our congregation like Bethlehem? How can we embody the affirming attitude of the prophecy quoted in the Epiphany story? *"You are by no means least... since from you will come..."* If we recognize and mutually support the dignity and contributions of every member of our community and trust that God will work through us, what might come forth from us?

In the coming weeks and months of this new year, we will be actively aiming to shine through several avenues:

- Continuing to welcome older and newer friends to come away into this beautiful space for spiritual respite, growth in faith, and deepening of our relationships
- Pursuing justice in collaboration with neighbors in our quarterly mission areas of homelessness, land recognition and stewardship,

racial and ethnic justice, and LGBTQ Inclusivity across the coming year

- Exploring the possibility of merger with the people of St. Peter's UCC, wondering if we might grow toward greater vibrancy, community impact, and sustainability with enough or even plenty of partners in being church
- Solidifying our dual affiliation – strengthening our connections within the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and within the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ. We look forward to participating in the Covenant Day in Robbinsdale, engaging with others around the many ways to seek to sustain and expand the ministries of our particular congregations
- And, finally, through embarking with our People's Park Improvements Task Force toward greater accessibility, definition and visibility of that sacred space

We will shine, we would hope!

Perhaps you've heard the story of the wise scholars we call magi more times than you could count. As you've listened to the story this morning, what aspect of it most intrigues you?

Does it intrigue you that the magi sought hope and meaning - an experience of great value – in a faraway land among people whose lives were likely to be vastly different from their own? That they traveled across rough terrain – vast deserts and rocky cliffs – in order to find and pay homage to the newborn ruler of the Jews?

Does it intrigue you that the magi were astrologers – highly educated scholars – who leaned into wondering about the prophecies of a faith tradition not their own? And what was the prophecy again?

*And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,
since from you will come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.*

Does it intrigue you that these astrologers from a faraway land understood as valuable the messianic promise of the Jews – the promise that God would continue to provide shepherd rulers to deliver them from the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire?

Does it intrigue you that they were so overjoyed by the star leading them to Jesus' birthplace that they would climb down off their camels and reverently prostrate themselves before a poor young child? What a reversal of roles! The powerful shall become weak and the weak powerful.

Does it intrigue you that, in solidarity with one another, they chose to follow God's still small voice in a dream – that they kept their encounter with the baby Jesus and his family to themselves – instead of bowing to the insecure, bullying ways of King Herod?

As you consider what intrigues you about the story of the magi this Epiphany, I will share with you a brief excerpt of the story as it is articulated in the illustrated children's *Spark Story Bible*. One moment reads like this:

“The wise ones kept following the star to find the baby. They finally found Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Bethlehem. They were quiet so they wouldn't wake baby Jesus. They knelt beside his bed. He was so tiny! They kissed his little cheek. ‘Sleep well, little one,’ they said, and they left him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Those were very expensive gifts. They were gifts fit for a king.” That comes from the *Spark Story Bible*.

What intrigues me most this Epiphany about the story of the magi – the wise ones – is this rendering of how they gave the infant Jesus the gift of being genuinely, reverently present with him. **I wonder, when have you recently felt someone being genuinely, reverently present with you?**

“They knelt beside his bed. He was so tiny! They kissed his little cheek. ‘Sleep well, little one,’ they said.” What greater gift than tenderness could they have offered to one so powerless in the world’s eyes?

In my office now hangs a Norman Rockwell image that also hung in the childhood room I shared with my sister, Aidan. In the painting, a doctor listens attentively through his stethoscope to the heartbeat of a doll held by its loving child. It is captioned with a quote from Jean Jacques Rousseau: *“What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?”*

“And they left him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Those were very expensive gifts. They were gifts fit for a king.” What a joy it can be to give a gift that far exceeds any expectations - an extravagant tip for waitstaff, a tollway payment for the car behind you on the freeway, snow blowing a neighbor’s walkway, a handwritten card in the mail. By offering an unexpected extravagant gift, we can make a joyful difference in someone’s outlook – even if lasts just for a moment or a day. *“What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?”*

Another key theme of the Epiphany story is that of fear being overwhelmed by joy. What would we do (individually and collectively) if we weren’t afraid? Because Mary was not afraid, she embraced her pregnancy at a young age, gave birth and raised Jesus in the midst of poverty. Because Joseph was not afraid (or overwhelmed by fear), he embraced the challenge of becoming a parent much sooner than anticipated and in a way not fully understood or supported by his society.

Jesus, God with us, the Word made flesh, could not have existed if Mary and Joseph had been overwhelmed by fear. **Let's each wonder today: 'In what area of my life does fear threaten to overwhelm me?' 'What would I do in that area if I wasn't afraid?'** These questions might lead us to acknowledging some of our deepest hopes and longings. Hope nurtures the possibility of joy, even in the midst of fear.

The magi (or wise ones) who traveled a long way to visit the infant Jesus were known as sages within their home community in Persia. They were likely philosophers and are called astrologers in *The Inclusive Bible*. We sense hope, wonder and purpose in the story of their journey. They followed the star all the way to Bethlehem because of deep hope, wonder, and purpose that compelled them forward.

The scriptures tell us that they were "overjoyed" upon arriving to the place where the star stood still. Another biblical translation, the *New Revised Standard Version*, states that they were "overwhelmed with joy" – so overwhelmed that they knelt down or prostrated themselves. They knew that God was extraordinarily present in that one of whom the prophecy spoke. The magi offer a timeless and powerful example of recognizing the Word made flesh, God's very presence incarnated in Jesus. And the magi challenge us to recognize God's loving Spirit incarnated through each of our present-day neighbors.

The experience of the magi being overwhelmed by their encounter with the baby Jesus reminds me of a scene from a romantic comedy film from the year 1999 entitled "*Ten Things I Hate About You*" – a modernization of Shakespeare's "*The Taming of the Shrew*." In the scene, a high school student asks her peer, "*I know you can be overwhelmed, and I'm pretty sure you can be underwhelmed, but can you ever just be whelmed?*"

While pondering the magi being overwhelmed with joy, I chose to look into the film character's question. In fact, one CAN be just whelmed. To be whelmed is to be covered, passed over, or submerged by something. In other words, to be whelmed is to have a mid-size wave pass over you near the ocean's shore, leaving you relatively unchanged.

By contrast, to be overwhelmed is to be overcome in thought or feeling - to be swept up in an enormous wave's current, to be spun or somersaulted and then dropped in the same spot or a nearby spot with a whole new layer of experience and perspective.

I wonder: what recent experiences have simply whelmed you – passed over you or submerged you and then left you relatively unchanged?

And I wonder: what recent experiences have overwhelmed you – swept you up, spun you around and left you with a whole new perspective?

The magi (these highly educated and prestigious individuals) could only have been available to being overwhelmed by joy if they approached their encounter with the infant ruler with open hearts and minds, lightness of feet and spirit.

How understandable would it have been for them to follow the brilliant star all the way to Bethlehem only to be whelmed or underwhelmed by the crude poverty of the Christ child and his family? The magi could be overwhelmed by joy because they approached the star's resting place in wonder and hope, not having filled their minds and hearts with their own specific expectations.

King Herod, on the other hand, would not be overwhelmed by joy in this story. He would be whelmed by fear. As a puppet governor in service of the Roman Empire, Herod exercised control over the Jewish people in Judea. He maintained power through tactics of oppression and violence.

Instead of living in a way that was rooted in his connectedness to God and others, Herod lived in a way that was rooted in fear of any threat to his power. His encounter with the magi washed over Herod in a way that left him in his typical mindset, noting that the people might rise up against him if enough of them believed that the prophecy of a Messiah was being fulfilled at that time through the birth of a child in Bethlehem. So Herod attempted to use the magi to help keep him secure in his comfortable whelmed position of power.

Just beyond the scope of today's gospel reading, when Herod realized that the magi had not honored his request to return to him with details on the infant ruler's whereabouts, he followed the lead of fear, ordering a genocide of all the youngest boys in Bethlehem.

The magi responded to their experience of joy by prostrating themselves to pay homage (that is, to show honor publicly) and to offer the gifts they could to the child and his family. **So, at the core of today's story, I wonder: what gifts can each of us offer?**

I encourage us to keep pondering what intrigues you about the story of the gift-giving magi this Epiphany. What do the magi teach you about how to give yourself in love and care toward others? What experiences and skills, what interests and energies might you offer for the good of our faith community this year? All of our gifts are needed as we move into the new year...

- Continuing to welcome older and newer friends to come away into this beautiful space
- As we pursue justice in collaboration with neighbors in the areas of our quarterly missions
- As we explore the possibility of merger with the people of St. Peter's UCC

- As we solidify our dual affiliation, strengthening our connections and resources
- And as we embark with our People's Park Improvements Task Force toward greater accessibility, definition and visibility of that space

I encourage you (in all of that) to keep in mind these words from the prophet Isaiah, *“Arise, shine, for [our] light has come. Though darkness still covers the earth and dense clouds enshroud the peoples, upon [us] God now dawns.”*

We are each a star, capable of shining the light of Love in our own unique way. And together, we can be like Bethlehem – confident that something beautiful and strong will come forth from us. May we shine on, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
January 8, 2023 (Epiphany Sunday)
Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12