

## **Do We Shine to Control or to Influence?**

Beloved friends and neighbors, finding ourselves gathered in the warmth of this community on Epiphany Sunday, let's begin this time of wonder and reflection with words of prayer:

O God, we welcome your illuminating presence among us this morning. Grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to live into acceptance, courage and the space between them. Amen.

Epiphany means appearance or manifestation. The word is commonly used to describe an illuminating discovery or realization. In our Christian tradition, Epiphany occurs on January 6<sup>th</sup> each year – the day immediately following the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. And each year, we recall the story of three astrologers traveling a significant distance (from Persia to Judea), following the appearance of a unique star with connections to a Judean prophecy. In our congregation, we tend to celebrate Epiphany on this second Sunday after Christmas.

In asking **'Do we shine to control or to influence?'** I invite us to consider these questions as they relate both to our individual ways of life and our way of life as St. Croix United Church: First, in what ways might people observe you/us shining? And how might people be affected by those ways in which you or we shine.

To shine is to emit rays of light. The sun and stars emit rays of light generated from a process called nuclear fusion deep within their cores. On a hot summer day, an automobile finish might reflect the sun's light from the car's impenetrable surface.

I believe we can shine more in the mode of the sun and stars (shining from our core) than in the mode of automobile finish (glossy and gleamy, reactively forwarding light without fully taking it in).

Holding in mind that distinction between shining from our core and shining from our surface, let's visit with our reading from the prophet Isaiah, which brims with possibilities of deep illumination. As Heather shared in her introductory words, the prophet was speaking to the people of Israel as they returned to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon. Listen for how Isaiah imagines God's love manifesting experiences that would be essentially opposite to what they had been living. **I wonder: what can you imagine as possible, even and especially if very different that your recent or current circumstances?** We will return to that question. We heard:

*"Arise, shine, for your light has come!... upon you God now dawns..."*

I hear: Oh, my people, you have been stuck in terrible circumstances. Come to attention, now... and stay attentive! The light of divine love is here and now! We heard:

*"The nations will come to your light and the leaders to your bright dawn!"*

I hear: Oh, my people, others have abused power to push you around and try to diminish you. But God's light will work through you to draw in the powerful toward the truth of divine justice that you bear. We heard:

*"Lift up your eyes, and look around: they're all gathering and coming to you... you'll see them and beam with joy, your heart will swell with pride."*

I hear Isaiah saying to the people: Oh, my people, you have witnessed your families be torn apart by internal and external conflicts. But God's light will draw you back together if you let your hearts be soft and participate in reunion. We heard:

*"The riches of the sea will flow to you, and the wealth of the nations will come to you..."*

I hear the prophet saying to them: Oh, my people, you have witnessed anxious times of isolation and insufficient resources. But God's light will empower the sharing of resources so that all have enough. And we heard:

*"Camel caravans will cover your roads... bringing gold and incense and singing the praise of God."*

I hear the prophet saying: Oh, my people, you have witnessed fearful incidents occurring in all parts of the world. But God's light will allow the peoples of the world to honor one another and come together in celebration!

I invite us now to consider for ourselves (personally, for our congregation, and for wider communities of which we are each part) these two questions. So if you have a pen and would like to jot them on your bulletin, I encourage you to do that so we can take a moment to reflect. The first question is: **What good thing is possible?** And the second question is: **How can I participate in that?** So, again, you may be thinking of your own family, your neighborhood, this church, or farther and farther out in circles. What good thing is possible? And how can I participate in that? I invite us to take a moment to reflect on these questions. *[singing bowl rings, followed by silence.]*

I believe that the Spirit is with us in all moments. And here is what the Spirit brought for me (and I invite if anyone else would like to share even the answer to the first question): What good thing is possible? Merger is possible for us. And how can I participate in that? The answer that came for me is to continue to listen – listen to all of you and listen to our new friends and neighbors. Does anyone else have (in just a few words) the thing that is possible that you would like to name out loud?

She believes that making connections in her cul-de-sac is possible. And she has a way that she has already begun to promote those connections.

He believes it is possible that there will be a way of housing for all people in the cold stretch coming up in Washington County. And he is connected throughout the community with people who are making that happen.

She echoes me from her own perspective – that our merger is possible. And, stepping back in, she sees from a certain perspective the love in the space and the effort that has happened. By support what we are doing as a member among us, she reminds us that we continue to do the hard work.

She believes that we can embody more tenderness toward those around us.

Ok! I believe that by finding ways to participate in God's light, we will be able to shine in a strong way (from our cores) if we are actually looking carefully for ways to be part of God's light and love.

And it does remind me of Jesus (in another gospel – in Luke) making his way on his final pilgrimage toward Jerusalem, when he was asked by a Pharisee (a teacher of Jewish scriptures) when the reign of God would be coming.

Jesus replied, *“The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you”* (Luke 17: 20-21). Jesus wanted his disciples (then and now) to be fully aware of how his life’s purpose had been to reveal to all of us God’s love and justice in which we can participate.

This reading from Isaiah also reminded me of lyrics by a singer songwriter named Drew Nelson. In his album, *Immigrant Son*, Drew shares the following words in a song entitled “Tractor.” He writes,

*“Once I met a man, a pilgrim at the borderline*

*Well, I had fallen badly, and I said, ‘this happens all the time.’*

*Well, he picked me up, he dabbed my face, looked deep into my eyes,*

*Said ‘it don’t matter if you stumble, son – just keep stumbling toward the light.’”*

Sometimes we gravitate and move smoothly toward light. And sometimes we stumble and need the gravitational pull of grace. May we remind ourselves today that stumbling toward the light is still movement in the direction of love. And may his words challenge us to hold our posture open to companions who might cross paths with us along the way and offer support even as we stumble.

Let’s shift to visit for a moment with the reading from Matthew. We heard: *“The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child lay. They were overjoyed at seeing the star and, upon entering the house, found the child with Mary, his mother.”*

The magi shone from their core. They had spent hours, days, years in their discipline of astrology – deeply wondering about the stars. They had heard a prophecy from way outside their culture, taken it seriously into themselves, and so they were open to the possibilities around them.

I want to end by echoing a few of the words we are saying and singing today. In our “Call to Worship,” we prayed, *“May our worship guide us, like the brightest star – closer to God, to ourselves, and to one another.”*

Nowell is an English word (possibly spelled this way newly in some of our lives) with roots in the Latin word *novellae*, meaning news. In verse two, we sang, *“They looked up and saw a star shining in the East, beyond them far And to the Earth it gave great light, and so it continues both day and night.”* It is our work to continue shining that star of Jesus’ presence in this world by taking it in over and over in the rhythms of our community.

And, finally, to return to my question of whether we shine to control or to influence; Herod seems to show forth a bit more the way of automobile finish in reflecting light in anxious ways off his surface:

*“Herod called the astrologers aside and found out from them the exact time of the star’s appearance. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after having instructed them, “Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report back to me”*

It is very possible that Herod began his life knowing he had a call to leadership and that, over time, he got used to the ease of abusing power. He got used to the insecurity and fear of what it someone disagrees with me? What if they don’t follow the way I think is right? He got scared.

And fear is part of our lives and fear causes us to want to control others – just shine back that thought right away, anxiously react with whatever is coming bouncing off of us.

But, as we prayed earlier, may we be more like the magi – taking it all in, hearing and seeing everyone around us, allowing ourselves to be informed. It is through shining from a deep core place in order to influence one another in loving ways that we can carry out Jesus’ mission. Let’s do that, because Love is counting on each of us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
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Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12