

What Contributes to Our Radiance?

On this Epiphany Sunday, we begin a new season in the cycle of our church year. Epiphany is a season for considering how we will bear the light of Christ (love made manifest through human life) in our individual lives and in our shared life as a congregation. It is a gift to be freely gathered today via live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and other people long before us and which we hope will be cherished long beyond us.

As we begin this time of reflection, let's join our hearts together in prayer: God, you are love radiating so powerfully that you reach the core of each of us. Make us receptive hosts for the radiant light of your love and also channels of it. May you be shared among all of us on your green and blue planet. Be with us today as the magi's visit to young Jesus and his parents teaches us lessons about radiance. Amen.

Each year we read the story of the magi making an extraordinary journey to encounter the baby Jesus. And each year it is paired with the reading we've just heard from Isaiah, chapter 60. This Epiphany Sunday, we've turned our calendars to January of 2025. Globally, we are witnessing warfare and mass suffering with widening gaps between starving and nourished, poor and wealthy, endangered and secure. Within our nation, we are witnessing and likely participating in a stark and bitter political divide affecting many of our relationships as we move closer to the presidential transition. In our personal lives, many of us feel a tension between the urge to create and comply with New Year resolutions to improve our lives and the lives of those around us... and the grace many people articulate through invitations toward self-acceptance as more important and powerful than New Year resolutions.

Given those dynamics of our contemporary context (many of them bleak), the idea of asking “What contributes to our radiance?” came from Isaiah 60, verse 5: “*Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice*” and from verse 3: “*Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*” To be radiant is to be sending out light or glowing brightly. Given the global, national, and personal tensions I’ve just named, we might wonder: how can we muster what it would take to radiate Christ light in these times? For added perspective, here is some context regarding Isaiah’s original audience:

Many scholars agree that the collection of writings called Isaiah was composed in three parts. The figure known as Isaiah wrote a bulk of First Isaiah (that is, the first 39 chapters) in the 8th century BCE, warning about possible foreign invasions. That individual wrote in a poet style; editors likely added prose into the text later on. Another author wrote Second Isaiah, that is chapters 40 through 55, two centuries later (in the 6th century BCE) when the people of Israel and Judah were living in exile in Babylon after Jerusalem had been sieged and many of its people capture.

A third author composed Third Isaiah (chapters 56 through 66, which include today’s reading), addressing the people of Israel as they returned to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon. The author sought to inspire the returning exiles: “*Arise, shine, your light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.*” What would it have meant if the people first receiving this message believed they could radiate God’s love? **And I wonder: what would happen if we as a congregation and individuals believe we can radiate God’s love right now – when the planet and its creatures are suffering in multidimensional ways, our nation is ethically divided in a deep way, and we wonder whether or not we will improve our lives and the lives of others this year?**

I find a thread tying the words from Isaiah to the story of the magi in the word “epiphany.” Rev. Dr. Renita Weems was the first African American woman in history to earn a PhD in Old Testament studies. She taught at Vanderbilt Divinity School and currently serves as Dean at Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta. Weems is a womanist theologian. Womanism is a branch of feminist studies that centers the experiences of women of color and specifically Black women. Weems explains that the original Greek word for epiphany (*epiphaneia*) means to manifest, show forth, or make clear.

Weems describes the magi seeking out an opportunity to witness the baby Jesus manifesting Christ light in this way – she writes: *“They had to open themselves up to new experiences, new ways of knowing, and new revelations in order to behold the Christ child in his stall in Bethlehem... basic to the Christian faith is a God who communicates, who acts, who reveals, who desires to be known.”* Words from Rev. Dr. Renita Weems.

The magi demonstrated receptivity to God’s light and responsiveness to it. They held an open, receptive posture toward new manifestations of light (in Weems’ words, *“new experiences, new ways of knowing, and new revelations*) when they let their sense of wonder and awe lead them to pursue an ideal view of the astrological event. They let themselves feel the fullness of overwhelming joy when they came upon a newborn child and recognized Christ light present in the baby. Their openness to feeling joy allowed them to respond boldly, offering generous gifts that could help sustain the young one’s fragile life. **What contributed to the magi’s radiance? Their readiness to receive and respond to the light of God’s love caused them to glow with humility and generosity.**

Rev. Dr. Weems also addresses today's text from Isaiah, writing this: *"The pathway is clear. Strangers are coming Family members are on their way. But even before the others come in their caravans, God's people must wake up, get up, behold the light for themselves, and make ready for this new thing that is being done on the earth."* **I wonder: Will we arise, behold the Christ light all around us, and make ready to be participate in radiating that loving light?** Let's remind ourselves of some of the moves in today's story about the magi to see what they reveal about what can contribute to our development as radiant people.

Instead of encouraging you to form a New Year resolution out of what you note as either lacking or in excess within your life (though that is definitely a valid practice), I want to draw this reflection to a close by inviting you to find one way of the magi that you would most like to emulate – a part of their radiance you would like to receive and channel in this new year.

Do you wonder about the **courage** the magi radiated? 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? **I wonder: Might each of us find opportunities to radiate courage in our own circumstances this New Year? And how might we radiate courage as a congregation?**

Do you wonder about the **appreciation of the other** that the magi radiated? 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? **I wonder: Might each of us find opportunities to radiate their appreciation of the other in our own circumstances in this new year? And how might we radiate appreciation of the other as a congregation?**

Courage. Appreciation of the other. Do you wonder about the uninhibited joy and awe that the magi radiated? 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. **I wonder: How might each of us find opportunities to radiate uninhibited joy and awe in your own circumstances in this new year? And how might we radiate uninhibited joy and awe of the other as a congregation?**

Courage. Appreciation of the other. Uninhibited joy and awe. Finally, do you wonder about the solidarity that the magi radiated? Does it intrigue you that, in solidarity with Jesus' struggling family, 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?

How might each of us find opportunities to radiate solidarity within our own circumstances in this new year? And how might we, as a congregation, radiate solidarity with those less powerful than we?

As we begin to discern which radiant way of the magi we might emulate (courage, appreciation of the other, uninhibited joy and awe, solidarity), let's hear again our opening words from a neighbor, James Baldwin:

"The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love – whether we call it friendship or family or romance – is the work of mirroring each other's light. Gentle work. Steadfast work. Life-saving work in those moments when shame and sorrow occlude our own light from view, but there is still a clear-eyed loving person to beam it back. In our best moments, we are that person for another."

May we radiate Christ light, friends – the love of God to be shared among all – because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
January 5, 2025 | Epiphany Sunday
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12