

“Perfect Gift”  
St. Paul’s UCC Church  
January 2, 2022

Friends in Christ....

This Sunday is Epiphany. Its simple definition is manifestation of God to us in the person of Jesus. It is commemorated on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas or January 6. We are familiar with the song “12 Days of Christmas”, and that represents the time between Christmas day and Epiphany.

The story of the Magi in Matthew 2 represents God’s Epiphany to the world, and not just to the Jews, as the Magi were gentiles from Persia. Our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah chapter 60 gives a prophecy of their coming. There are believed to be three Isaiah’s. Chapters 1-39 come from a time when Judah, the southern kingdom was threatened by their powerful neighbor Assyria. Chapters 40-55 speak of a time when many of the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, crushed and without hope. Chapters 56-66 for the most part speak of a time when people were back in Jerusalem and needed reassurance that God was going to fulfill his promises. Our text comes from the third Isaiah when Jerusalem was in shambles and this prophecy was to give the people hope by bringing light into a great darkness.

**Isaiah 60: 1-6**

**60** Arise! Shine! Your light has come;  
the LORD’s glory has shone upon you.  
<sup>2</sup> Though darkness covers the earth  
and gloom the nations,  
the LORD will shine upon you;  
God’s glory will appear over you.  
<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light  
and kings to your dawning radiance.  
<sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes and look all around:  
they are all gathered; they have come to you.  
Your sons will come from far away,  
and your daughters on caregivers’ hips.  
<sup>5</sup> Then you will see and be radiant;  
your heart will tremble and open wide,

because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you;  
the nations' wealth will come to you.  
6Countless camels will cover your land,  
young camels from Midian and Ephah.  
They will all come from Sheba,  
carrying gold and incense,  
proclaiming the LORD's praises.

Quickly for reference: Sheba was in southern Arabia; Midian was land east of the Jordan and the Dead Sea; and Ephah was in Northwest Arabia. They would have been gentiles, not Jews.

Think how well this positive message must have been received. Even though it was the pits for the people then, the promise of tomorrow was a welcome one. There is going to be a great light that will bring people from far and near. For Isaiah, the light which has come to Jerusalem is God's glory. The story of the Magi in the Gospel reveals that the light is Christ himself, manifested to all nations.

We know that some of the prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. For example, the camels never did come.

The prophet that we call "Third Isaiah," looks ahead to a time of restoration, when Zion would so reflect the light of God that the nations would flock to it.

It is a renewal of the vision expressed long before by First Isaiah, picturing a time when all nations would stream toward Jerusalem to learn Torah and beat swords into plowshares (Is 2:2-5) which is a text that we often hear at Easter time.

Further, today's reading echoes the songs of Second Isaiah, who envisioned Servant Israel missioned as a "light to the nations." Matthew's account of the Magi worshiping the child Jesus reflects the early Church's conviction that the Christ's coming began to fulfill that vision of Isaiah. For us that the vision of the People of God as a "light for the nations" still beckons.

Verse 2 talks about darkness covering the earth. It is used as term about the people not seeing God's glory. The creation poem in Genesis chapter one begins with earth being in total darkness. The first thing that happened was God bringing light to the world. We cannot live without light.

Have you ever been in a cave deep underground and the guide turns off the lights. We were one time at the Mark Twain Cave outside of Hannibal, Missouri. It is incredible how dark it is and how disorienting it is, a very helpless feeling. That was how the Jewish people were feeling. Though it took a few centuries, light did come into the world in Bethlehem. Matthew tells us that there was a light in the sky pointing to the real Light of the World. People referred to as Magi saw

the light in the sky and followed it. Note, the number of visitors (never mentioned by Matthew) varied from two (see the art in the Roman catacombs of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus) to twelve (in some medieval Eastern lists). Legend says three because of the three gifts.

**Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)**

### **Coming of the Magi**

**2** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, Magi came from the east to Jerusalem. **2** They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

**3** When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. **4** He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. **5** They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

**6** *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs,  
who will shepherd my people Israel.*”

**7** Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you have found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” **9** When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. **11** They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word? Amen.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Both Matthew and Luke agree on that. Matthew implies that the family was living there.

Because we know almost nothing about the Magi other than they would have been gentiles, our imaginations take over. If we were brought up in the Christian faith, these characters have ridden across our minds and hearts ever since we were taken to our first Sunday school pageant. Even the most sophisticated

children secretly envy those who have been selected to play the wise men. Parents will ransack attics for pieces of fabric—the more brilliant and exotic the better—and someone in the family will create a costume that will be linked to no particular age or time or culture but will somehow speak of far-off places, distant shores, desert sands and starry skies—all at the same time.

The Magi came from Persia, perhaps where the current Baghdad is located and travelled approximately 1,000 miles. It is believed that they were Zoroastrian astrologers. (Zoroastrianism is an ancient Persian religion that may have originated as early as 4,000 years ago.) They looked at the heavenly bodies and stars because they believed that significant events were foretold there. Though there is no record of it one does wonder if anyone else saw the light?

The Magi's deep wisdom is evident as we read of their dealings with the court of Herod. Civilized and mannered, they pay their respects to Herod, yet with contemptuous ease they see the reality behind the pathetic physical and mental wreck Herod has become. They have gained experience at a far more powerful court, and have no illusions about Herod's ability to be dangerous and vicious, even in his decline.

The Magi represent forever and for all of us the wisdom that recognizes human life to be a journey taken in search of One who calls us beyond ourselves into faithful service—One before whom we are prepared to kneel, and to whom we offer the best of our gifts, flawed and unworthy though they be.

We watch these visitors to Bethlehem, as they kneel with supreme grace and dignity before what is to them simplicity, vulnerability and poverty. They are prepared to kneel, for in their wisdom—and this is the heart of what makes them truly wise—they discern the glory that is hidden in this place and in this child.

We are taught by the Magi to value the Child. He acquires worth and splendor through their eyes. That is part of what Epiphany gives us: models for our desire, for our adoration. With each gift we are offered a way to shift the weight of our heart in an unaccustomed direction. When the Magi offer him gold, which indicates a king, we are invited to lessen the tribute we offer to the power structures to which we belong and on which we depend. When they offer him frankincense, which represents wisdom, we are invited to tiptoe out from under the delusions of our sacred canopies, to be drawn into the jagged-edged sacrifice of presence that this Priest will carry out. And when they offer him myrrh, a prized perfume which indicates a prophet's death, the Magi invite our hearts to lighten as death loses its hold over our drives and desires.

The chief priests and scribes knew where the Messiah would be born because they could interpret the parts in the Old Testament that predicted the

Messiah's birth. The Magi from the Far East knew that the Messiah had been born because they could interpret the presence of the star in the sky. King Herod had the political power to command their knowledge and wisdom for his own purposes.

But what about people who lack the advantages of the priest and Magi and who have no power to command others? How are they to know? Does God only make provision for the fortunate? Not at all! Consider the shepherds who received the Good News.

The response by the Magi and their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah underscores the message that Jesus is the "light of all peoples." The Good News is that no one is excluded, Jew and gentile alike. Jesus was God's perfect gift to all peoples.

Thanks be to God. Amen.