

“Rise, Shine”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
January 1, 2023

Friends in Christ....

Today we celebrate Epiphany, which is the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi that is found in Matthew 2:1-12, which is our gospel lesson for today. It is a familiar story for us. Probably there are more legends connected to this text than any other story in the Bible. We will get to that shortly.

First, we will look at our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. This is believed to have been written by the Third Isaiah after those who were in exile in Babylon had returned to Jerusalem and Judah in the 6th century BC. They found the city in shambles. Even the magnificent temple was nothing but a pile of rubble. In Jerusalem, a major conflict had arisen between those who remained and those who returned. Living conditions were extremely difficult. The people were divided again, not against some outside threat or enemy, but among themselves. The people were discouraged and needed something to give them hope. The prophet Isaiah wrote several passages to bring hope to those returnees. In our text, we see that he gives a sparkling vision of a new Jerusalem that will come in the future.

Old Testament: Isaiah 60:1-6

Jerusalem’s Coming Radiance

60 Arise! Shine! Your light has come;
the LORD’s glory has shone upon you.
² Though darkness covers the earth
and gloom the nations,
the LORD will shine upon you;
God’s glory will appear over you.
³ Nations will come to your light
and kings to your dawning radiance.
⁴ 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.
⁵ 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.
⁶ Countless 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.

The word of the Lord.

The vision of our text and of the other Zion poems found in Chapters 44 through 66 is one of complete restoration. The tone is triumphant and tender. Yet it has not yet been fulfilled, at least in ways we understand it. After the prophecy was given, there was little change of fortune for the people. Jerusalem was still in shambles.

Like many biblical texts, Isaiah 60:1-6 can be a source of hope and healing as this text imagines an end to war and being delivered from bondage, suffering, poverty, and hunger. For the first hearers of this prophecy who were struggling with the rebuilding effort, this text imagines a new dawn breaking. God's glory once again came to the people. This epiphany, or God's manifestation of his glory tells us that the people will see a great light and there will be rejoicing after years of great sadness.

If we focus on Isaiah 60, because in an uncanny way it anticipates that Matthew 2 event and shows us the deeper and wider meaning of that little family event and of "the one who is born King of the Jews." Isaiah 60 shows us why Matthew 2 calls for world-wide celebration and deep reflection. The King of the Jews is the Light of the World, "the Lord rising upon us."

Verse 2 is the key to this text. "See," it says, and people can see. Many cannot believe the good news that the light has come, that the glory of the Lord has risen upon us. But anyone with eyes, even the blind, can see that "darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples...." Seeing the darkness is the key to believing in the Light.

We live in a darkness. Examples abound in politics, in societal trends, in world-wide tensions, in personal experiences. And that darkness is what makes Isaiah 60 such a glorious text. Verse 2 summarizes it powerfully: "Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you; "God's glory will appear over you." There is the Gospel in two words, "the Lord." It's a Gospel that needs to be heard in this dark world.

And it is important to come to Christ again and again, so that we may reflect his glory. The light has come, but we must come to the Light, so that the nations will see his light in us and be attracted to the Light of the world. We are to Rise and to Shine God's reflection.

Now let us hear about the Coming of the Magi. After the text is read, some questions will be asked.

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. ²They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

³When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. ⁴He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They 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.*"

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. ⁸He 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." ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. ¹¹They 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. ¹²Because 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.

How many Magi were there? (The Bible gives no number – three comes from legends and perhaps from the three gifts.)

What were their names? (The Bible gives no names – One legend lists them as Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar, who was a Black man.)

Were they kings? (The Bible never says they are kings and calls them magi.)

Brian Stoffregen in his Exegetical Notes wrote: "To understand the power of this story, the listeners must first come to a new understanding of the Magi. Many English translations render this Greek word, "wise men" (NRSV has "astrologers" in a footnote). That is being far too kind about these visitors. That is being misleading about these worshipers. Perhaps, because these visitors from the East are such good models of faith, we have been afraid to really present them for what they were. Originally, in Persia, Magi were dream-interpreters. By Jesus' time, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or stargazers. In fact, our word "magic" or "magician" comes from this word "magi". They were not so much respectable "wise men" or "kings" but horoscope fanatics -- a practice condemned by Jewish standards. We might compare them to people in fortune-teller booths, or people on the "psychic hotline" or other "occupations" that fore-tell the future by stars, tea leaves, Tarot cards, etc.

Why did God use a star? It was because the Magi understood stars. Magi looked for and understood signs in the sky. A special star (or comet?) made sense to them. In addition, the text tells us that they came from the east and that they saw the star in the east (or at its

rising). The sign came to them where they were. God got their attention in a way that they understood and, in the place, where they were.

Here they are clearly thought of as astronomers or astrologers, who have found the rising of a star to be of world-historical significance. It was a common idea in antiquity that the birth or death of great men was accompanied by heavenly signs.

This is a matter of time. Matthew's literary seamlessness makes it seem as if all of the events in chapter 2 happen day after day. However, there were actually weeks and years between the narratives. Jesus must have been at least two years old during the end of Herod's reign. Otherwise, the despot would not have ordered the death of children under two (Matthew 2:16). It took some time for the Magi to travel from the east all the way to reach Bethlehem. It is estimated that they travelled close to a thousand miles as these magi originated from Persia (modern day Iraq). They were followers of Zoroastrianism, a belief system that was a precursor to Islam. Whereas translations refer to them as "wise men," it is doubtful only men were in this group. Caravans from Persia often included women practitioners of this religion as well.

The term Magi is a plural form of *magoi* in Greek language, which means Zoroastrian priests. They were neither kings nor wise men. Maybe they earned the title wise men because of their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology. They were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world which is still active in Iran today. It was the official religion of Persia before Islam.

The primary prophet for Zoroastrianism is Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe that he was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. Like Jesus, Zoroaster started his ministry at age of 30 after he defeated all Satan's temptations. He predicts that "other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded." Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior.

Matthew tells us that Zoroastrian priests followed the star of Bethlehem to Jesus' birthplace to assure his audience that Jesus is a fulfillment not only of Old Testament prophecy of the virgin birth, but also Zoroastrian virgin birth prophecies. The Gentile Magi recognize Jesus' divinity and kingship. Matthew presents Jesus as the expected King of the Jews and the Gentiles. It was important for Matthew to show that the Magi went to Bethlehem not Rome to look for the King of the Jews, the Messiah. Matthew's audience understood the Persians to be a long-standing religious and political ally against Rome.

Matthew starts his gospel by showing a contrast between the Gentiles and Jewish secular and religious leaders. The Magi "knelt down and paid him homage." (verse 11), but King Herod the Great wanted to kill him. Matthew wants to show throughout his gospel that Jewish leaders rejected Jesus and oppressed him, but the Gentiles accepted him.

The Magi gave Jesus three gifts. Gold is a sign of kingship, long associated with the gods, and frankincense represents wisdom and myrrh is a sign of long life and healing. Frankincense was and still is a costly incense and myrrh was a prized perfume. These gifts were usually given to a king or a person with high status. (People sometimes joke that this group was the first and last group of men invited to a baby shower, since their presents were not at all practical.)

We know that the main character in Matthew is the Messiah, with promises of the Hebrew Scriptures and to establish God's realm on earth. We are to rise and to shine the glory of God wherever we go, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. The coming of the Magi invites us into God's kingdom. He is the God of all.

Amen.