

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12
Isaiah 60:1-6

Light of God in Us

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah (Eefah); all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

I have to make a confession; I haven't gotten around much this holiday season. But when I did interact with people about this New Year, I kept hearing something like, "I have no idea how this New Year is going to go, but I'm so glad to see last year leave!" I think it was the fourth time I read or heard it that I began to believe that a general feeling was that 2010 was not the best of all years for a lot of people.

It was a difficult year for so many. The economic problems hit so many, and the pressures on those who have secure jobs seem to be hit all the harder. Fewer people doing the jobs of many, pressure on those in the public services to perform miracles for those they are serving, the very public political battles can leave anyone who listens feeling bruised and worn out. And when so many people are suffering there can be a change in the general atmosphere. And to top it all off, we are just getting over the darkest days of the year. It can feel for so many as though there is **"darkness [covering] the earth, and thick darkness the peoples."**

In our sermon text, Isaiah is talking to those Israelites who were trying to rebuild the community under the difficult circumstances of return from the Babylonian exile. They had some hope of restoration, but it was not anything like what their lives had been when King David ruled.

"The call of the prophet Isaiah in this passage is spoken to encourage a dispirited people to see God's transformative light coming just over the horizon and to imagine that when that light breaks over Zion, the city will be radiant, filled with the glory of God. Metaphorically light is the power of God to break through the increasing despair of those who had returned from exile to a world that Second Isaiah promised would be verdant but that in reality was marked by poverty and famine." Emily Askew

I believe that is what we are feeling today. Our nation is not where it once was, but we have hope, and for those whose hopes may have taken a beating lately, we have the Epiphany of our Lord – a day where we celebrate three of the wisest people of the world in their time - who came to recognize, through science and through trust, the extraordinary nature of the human we came to call our savior.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, although it is actually on the 6th, marking the final, 12th day of Christmas. For the Orthodox Church that is the day they celebrate Christmas relating it to the Wise men and the gifts they bring. It started in the Eastern Church in honor of the baptism of Jesus and was introduced in the West in the fourth century.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Matthew does not say that there are 3 wise men – but the number probably came from the 3 gifts: gold – for a King; frankincense – for divinity; and myrrh – a spice used for burials, symbolizing suffering and sacrifice.

The emphasis seems to be vital that Jesus be from the line of David – which is why it was important that Jesus be from Bethlehem, but his recognition by the international community and the world of science, represented by these three extravagant visitors, I believe is as important to us in this modern world today as it was thousands of years ago.

Today we have numerous books focusing on the relationship between science and faith. We have a creationist museum, and school debates about the creationism versus Darwinism. And yet, one of our earliest and most cherished images are these men of science kneeling before this baby, recognizing that it was their intellectual curiosity that brought them to trust the truth that God does amazing things.

I have printed out some pictures of the Adoration of the Magi. In most of them you will see at least one of them scratching their head or just looking befuddled. The shock of at first glance wondering why on earth your brilliance has brought you to the simplicity of a baby laying in a food trough for animals.

Isn't real life like that sometimes? You get all worked up on how something is going to be and then real world steps in and it is far different. We are faced with befuddlement. We have to adjust our expectations or miss out on the purpose of our whole journey.

We can rail against the moment and demand that life turn around and become how we expected it – or we can stand, scratch our heads – reevaluate and learn from pure and simple truth that God is with us in the most sublime ways.

Back to our sermon text; Isaiah doesn't leave them in the darkness, not at all. No, he tells the people to, “**Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.**” Faced with a dreariness, he advises his people to open their eyes and acknowledge the light of God that is front of them – around them – just as the light guided the 3 wise men to the stable the light of truth and wisdom and of God gives hope today, and Isaiah was witnessing to them then and to us now. The hope of the statement, “**5Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice**” is amazing – and very true!

We are the light of the world. The hope that we have found in our faith – in our trust in one another – in the care of this church over the decades – in all of these ways and many more, we live the life of light that God is leading us to. In our mutual care for one another and extended to all, our commitment and action that renounces the evil forces of this world and resists injustice and oppression, our praise of God in the midst of suffering and uncertainty, our witness through lives of holiness to the holiness of God -- all of these are signs of God's glory shining on and through us, if we will let it shine.

And if we can't shine – and God knows we can't always shine – we need to gather a couple of wise men and or women together and take a journey to find our light again, trusting in the community and care of those we trust. This is what congregations do. We are here because we recognize our need for love and faith and forgiveness and we have come to trust each other, and we have come to know that we have something to offer others as well.

Let us look towards this year of 2011 as being a new possibility to embrace strangers, invite neighbors, laugh and give hope to all those we can. May this year be a missionary year for our Church, that we can pull our hopes and energies together - because we have a unique place of light and music and love and faith, here, and there are so many that need to lighten their load and be enlightened. May we serve all who come to us in grace this year. AMEN