

This morning our scriptures are full of light – Isaiah calling out “Arise, shine, your light has come!” and the magi following the bright shining star and discovering the Christ child. In the Eastern Church the celebration of the wise men following the star and finding the Christ Child predates the celebration of Christmas. This celebration is called Epiphany and it speaks of God being shown to the world, being revealed to us in some way. God is made manifest, made visible, made clear in a way that we can experience and learn from. We see this through the visit of the magi – the three kings who see a new star burning brightly in the sky, and according to their prophecies, this signals that a new king is born. For them, the star in the sky was all they needed to see and believe that something amazing was happening, to leave their homes and travel through a foreign land, to come pay homage to this new king.

Now many of you know this story of the magi or more popularly known as the three wise men. But have you ever considered that perhaps there were more than three wise men? There’s an old book by Henry Van Dyke called the Story of the Other Wise Man and it chronicles a magi who misses the caravan to Jerusalem because he stops to help an ill man on the side of the road. He still travels to Bethlehem, but he’s missed the holy family, who has fled to Egypt, and he’s missed his magi friends, who have gone home by another road. He goes to Egypt and searches for Jesus in the refugee camps and settlements. He ministers to those he encounters on the way, even as it delays his search for the child. He spends the gifts he’d brought for the baby to feed people, to free people, to care for people.

Finally, 33 years later, he's back in Jerusalem as Jesus is about to be crucified. The magi is headed to the cross and encounters yet one more person who needs his help. He's feeling a failure, having missed the king he's been looking to give homage to his whole life, when God speaks to him, thanking him for his gifts.

The man responds with "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?", quoting a passage from the end of Matthew's gospel in chapter 25.

And God responds to this other magi, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." You see, even though this man felt like a failure, like he had missed out on something great, he lived faithfully and he continued to do the right thing time and time again. His life was shining and glorifying God even when he could not see it for himself.

I wonder if Matthew 25 is the way the author of this gospel invites us to follow the star. We too missed the original caravan, but as followers of Christ, we are still drawn to the star that reveals who Jesus is for us, and who we are called to be in response. That is what we celebrate today. We celebrate the fact that we are still being drawn to the light of Christ, that we are still being called to be the light of Christ.

On this Epiphany Sunday, we are invited to not only search after the light, but to live the light, sharing Christ's light with others, just as the 4th magi did. We may not always feel like our

lives are shining but each time we do an act of love, each time we help someone in need, each time we offer our gifts to others, each time we show up in Jesus' name, our lives are inherently shining the light of Christ whether we feel it or recognize it or not.

Epiphany is the official end of the Christmas Season and comes just as a new year is unfolding before us. It's a time we take stock of the year we just survived – remembering the good and the bad of the past 12 months. I've seen Facebook posts of people celebrating each thing they accomplished over the past year: degrees awarded, new relationships announced, careers launched, births celebrated. But we all know, 2021 was full of not only good, but also struggle, hardship, and loss. Remembering what we've lived through, both good and bad helps us to look forward to a New Year with high aspirations of the things we want to accomplish in the coming months.

This season of taking stock of our lives and setting goals for the future is important in all aspects of our lives, especially when it comes to our faith. Friends, we have lived through a couple of really hard years... and with this current spike in COVID, its obvious that the dark times are not yet behind us. But this is exactly why it is so important for us to focus on the light and look forward with hope for the way Christ's light is being revealed, even in the struggle.

I came across a quote this week from Amanda Gorman – the amazing young poet who wowed the nation at last January's inauguration. She said, "You can't relive the same day twice – meaning every dawn is a new one, and every year an opportunity to step into the

light.” This Epiphany, let us resolve to not only see the light, or follow the light, but also to step into the light... to live the light... to be the light!

One of the traditions that many Methodist churches hold on this first Sunday of the new year is the praying together of the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. It’s a prayer of promise and commitment – a dedication and offering up of one’s life to God’s work. As I close this morning, I invite us to pause for a moment of silent reflection.... I invite us each to take stock of the year we’ve just concluded, remembering both the highs and the lows, where we’ve gotten it right, and lived out the love of God in our everyday interactions, and where we’ve missed the mark. And then let’s look ahead to 2022, the brand new year, which grants us all a fresh opportunity to step into the light. I invite us all to reflect on some way that we will tangibly shine the light of Christ for others in the coming year.

And as our time of silent reflection comes to an end, I invite us all to join our voices together to pray the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. Let us now pause to take stock and look ahead to the new year...

“I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,

exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”