

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

‘EPIPHANY SUNDAY’

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Isaiah 60)*

One: Arise! Shine! for your light has come,
All: and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
One: Though darkness covers the earth
All: and thick darkness the peoples,
One: the Lord will shine upon you;
All: God’s glory will appear over you.
One: Nations will come to your light
All: and kings to your dawning radiance.

***OPENING HYMN** “As with Gladness Men of Old” GtG 150

1. **As with gladness men of old
did the guiding star behold;
as with joy they hailed its light,
leading onward, beaming bright;
so, most gracious Lord, may we
evermore be led to thee.**
2. **As with joyful steps they sped,
Savior, to thy lowly bed,
there to bend the knee before
thee, whom heaven and earth adore;
so may we with willing feet
ever seek thy mercy seat.**
3. **As they offered gifts most rare
at thy manger, rude and bare,
so may we with holy joy,
pure and free from sin's alloy,
all our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to thee, our heavenly king.**

(continued...)

4. **Holy Jesus, every day
keep us in the narrow way;
and when earthly things are past,
bring our ransomed souls at last
where they need no star to guide,
where no clouds thy glory hide.**

Words: William Chatterton Dix, ca. 1858
Tune: DIX, Conrad Kocher, 1838; abr. William Henry
Monk, 1861; harm. *The English Hymnal*, 1906
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Merciful God, Light of the world, we confess that we have not resisted the darkness of sin. We bear grudges against our neighbors, while it is your nature to forgive. We hold tightly to our possessions, while Christ blesses the poor. In him you have spoken peace, yet we live in turmoil. We care little for this planet, which you in goodness created for our habitation. In mercy forgive us, and help us to amend our ways that we may shine with the light of your saving grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Isaiah 7, John 3, & Matthew 1)*

One: The light shines in the darkness with the truth of Immanuel: that God is with us.
All: **The Good News is this: “God loved the world so much that God gave God’s only Son.”**
One: Friends, let us believe the Good News of the Child born in Bethlehem: his name is “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”
All: **So let us rejoice and be glad! For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Alleluia! Amen!**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

ISAIAH 60:1-6 (Common English Bible+)

¹ *Arise! Shine! for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

² *Though darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness the peoples,
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 about you:
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 thrill and swell with joy;
because the sea's abundance
will be turned over to you;
the nations' wealth will come to you.*

⁶ *Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels
from Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.*

MATTHEW 2:1-12 (Common English Bible)

¹ *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've 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.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Light-RRRR” by Pastor Bill Vincent

My senior year in college. I had been a member of the Christian Fellowship on campus, and I had been asked to lead one of the Sunday evening studies for the group. I was thrilled and honored, and went about preparing for a study of the concept of light in the Bible: you know, “Let there be light,” “light of the world” kind of stuff.

When the time came, I began my presentation by asking what came to mind when they heard the word ‘light’. After some silence, one person shouted out, “It’s fast!”

And I was at a loss. I had no idea what to do with that, where to go with that.

I was thinking of things like:

- light reveals things to us, illumines our surroundings
- light warms us
- light encourages us
- light lifts our spirits
- light gives us a sense of hope.

Not, “It’s fast!” I still don’t know what to do with that. Except maybe let it serve as an illustration that all images (metaphors) break down at some point: i.e., not all aspects of an image are applicable, or helpful.

But light is helpful.

Light is useful.

Light is important.

But to see that,

- we have to RECOGNIZE the light
- we have to REALIZE the light
- we have to RESPOND to the light
- we have to REFLECT the light.

We must RECOGNIZE the light – in a star; in a child lying in a bed of straw.

Which seems rather silly to say. Of course we recognize the light.

But...how often do we turn our backs on the light instead? Because something in the darkness has piqued our interest and we'd rather explore that.

Or we close our eyes to the light. Because we don't want to see, or don't like what we see, or it hurts our eyes.

But for this light to make a difference in our lives, we have to open our eyes to it and turn to see the light. Recognize that, yes, there is a light; and there – here! – it is.

And note: The magi recognized the light: *"We've seen his star in the east."* They saw it. And not everyone did.

But once we've noticed it, then we have to not simply see the light and recognize that there is a light.

We have to REALIZE something of its significance – in a star; in a child lying in a manger.

That this is not just any light that we see. This is a light shining for you and me. It is intended for us.

For it shines into our darkness, and the darkness of our world.

And note: The magi realized something of the significance of this light, as they traveled from afar. And not everyone did.

And then we have to RESPOND to this light – to a star, to a child.

It is not enough simply to recognize there is a light and realize something of its significance.

We have to respond to the light.

The light shines into our lives, and into our darkness.

Now what are we going to do?

Will we go toward the light?

Or will we be repulsed by the light? and flee from it?

Will we follow the light, and be guided by its illumination, and the direction in which it points us?

And so (hopefully) respond to this light...positively.

And it is important to make that distinction.

For in his own way, Herod recognized the light and realized something of the significance of the light – all through the report of the magi. But he responded with force and death, violence and the slaughter of the children.

But the magi responded with gifts and worship, with honor and with self.

Will we respond positively to what the light is telling us and what it is showing us, and how it is guiding us?

Like the magi responding to the light positively when not everyone did.

But note, too, part of what it means to respond, and respond positively, to this light is for us to REFLECT this light.

For as the light has shone in such a way that we have finally recognized it, perhaps we can reflect the light in such a way that others might recognize it, too. Even though our reflected light may be significantly dimmer than the original source.

And as we have realized something of the significance of the light for us and for our world, perhaps we can reflect the light in such a way that others, too, might realize the significance of the light for us, and for them, and for the world. Perhaps in the way we live and the choices we make and the way we relate to others and value others.

And as we respond to the light, perhaps we can reflect the light in such a way that others, too, will be drawn to respond to the light and reflect the light to each other. So that – who knows? – maybe we might find that we can and do and are reflecting the light together.

All because the light is working in us and shining through us and living in us, and so transforming us as vessels of light and bearers of light and indeed people of light.

And as I reflect the light to others, I see it more clearly, and with greater understanding, so that I can respond to it on a deeper level, and I can reflect it even better.

Robert Fulghum, in his intriguing sort of way, tells a story that took place on the island of Crete: a place and a people that had experienced the horror of World War Two: the darkness of occupation, the night of harboring hate.

On that island, beside a Greek Orthodox monastery, **“is an institute dedicated to human understanding and peace. ... An improbable task,”** Fulghum writes, **“given the bitter residue of war...”**

But the institute is a success, largely due to one person, Alexander Papaderos, who **“came to believe ... at war’s end ... that the Germans and the Cretans”** – bitter adversaries during the war – **“had much to give one another – much to learn from one another. ... For if they could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any people could.”**

And Papaderos succeeded in making that dream a reality, not only as an institute, but also for people.

Robert Fulghum had enjoyed the fruit of that institute when Alexander Papaderos himself had stood before a group at the end of a seminar **“And made,”** what Fulghum called, **“the ritual gesture: ‘Are there any questions?’”** (We’ve heard that before.)

Silence followed that question, as it usually does.

Then Fulghum asked the question he yearned to ask and yearned to have taken seriously.

“Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?”

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go.

Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was.

“I will answer your question.”

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.

And what he said went like this:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

“I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated

by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine – in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge [– love? –] – is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the black places in [people’s] hearts – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.” (Robert Fulghum, It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It, 1988, 1989, p.171-175)

And then Alexander Papaderos took his mirror and reflected the morning light streaming through the window onto Fulghum’s face and onto his hands.

Much of the world has visited some version of Bethlehem in the past two weeks. Bethlehem: where the source of light has been proclaimed.

And much of the world remains in the dark: both the dark around us and within us.

And here we’re left with a story about a quarter-sized mirror reflecting light into dark crevices.

And now much of the world is ready to move on beyond Bethlehem – move on to something else.

Just yesterday I heard that celebrations are already starting in St. Louis for the Mardi Gras season – I didn’t know “Fat Tuesday” was a season.

But much of the world remains ready to move on to something else: to parties and divisions; to shouting and separating; to name-calling and tearing down.

But we have been to Bethlehem ourselves, have we not?

And we have recognized something there that we can only refer to as light.

And we have realized that there is something significant in this light: something more than a simple aid to help us avoid stubbing our toes in the dark.

And have we not begun to respond to this light, even by our gathering here this morning in worship?

And in all of that, do we not see – and know – something of the meaning of our life? to reflect that very light.

The light we may see may only be a small pin prick on the vast dark dome of the night – like a star.

Or it may be a blaze of glory – like angelic hosts serenading shepherds in the night.

Or it may be a soft glow from a newborn child.

Or a surprising dawn from an empty tomb.

But in each case – and in every case – we have recognized the light for what it is; we have realized something of its significance for us, and for others; and we have responded positively to that light.

So now we are called to reflect that light. It is something of the “meaning of *our* life”: to reflect that light. To abide in that light. To live in that light.

Let it guide you. Let it warm you. Let it fill you.

And let the whole world see the light...in you.

***HYMN “Lord, the Light of Your Love Is Shining” GtG 192**
(Shine, Jesus, Shine)

**1. Lord, the light of your love
is shining,
in the midst
of the darkness, shining;
Jesus, Light of the World,
shine upon us;
set us free by the truth
you now bring us.
Shine on me; shine on me.**

Refrain: **Shine, Jesus, shine;
fill this land with the Father’s glory.
Blaze, Spirit, blaze;
set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow;
flood the nations with grace
and mercy.
Send forth your word, Lord,
and let there be light.**

**2. Lord, I come to your
awesome presence,
from the shadows into
your radiance;
by the blood I may enter
your brightness.
Search me; try me;
consume all my darkness.
Shine on me; shine on me. (Refrain)**

(continued...)

**3. As we gaze on your
kingly brightness,
so our faces display
your likeness;
ever changing from glory to glory,
mirrored here may our lives tell your story.
Shine on me; shine on me. (Refrain)**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from "A Declaration of Faith")

**God sent God's Son
to proclaim release to those who are bound,
to announce that God's promised kingdom is at hand,
to urge everyone to repent and believe the good news.
The Lord is moving toward the time
when the glorious liberty of the children of God
will be manifest throughout the whole creation.
We testify God is at work here and now
when people obey Christ's commission
to witness to him and make disciples of all nations,
when they spread the good news by their words
and embody it in their lives.
We believe that God sends us
to tell all nations
that Christ calls everyone to repentance, faith, and obedience.
We are to proclaim by word and deed
that Christ gave himself to set people free
from sin and self-hatred,
from ignorance and disease,
from all forms of oppression,
and even from death.
We are to offer them in Christ's name
fullness of life now and forever.
We must not distort the gospel
by weakening its promises or demands,
by identifying it with oppressive structures,
by pointing to ourselves instead of Christ.
We must not restrict our proclamation
to persons just like ourselves.**

(continued...)

**We invite people everywhere
to believe in Christ and become his followers.
We urge them to join us in telling others the good news
and in struggling for justice, compassion, and peace.**

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: And so we lift up our prayers to you...
All: ...Gracious God, Lord of Light.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Loving God, we give you thanks for the light of the world, Jesus Christ. Receive the gifts we offer that they may bring glory to you in the ways they bear your love into the world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: **And also with you.**

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: **We lift them to the Lord.**

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

(The prayer continues...)

The Lord's Prayer (Traditional)

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

(continued...)

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
 and the power, and the glory,
 forever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(With the passing of the bread, please wait until all have been served so that we may partake together, reminding us of our participation in this sacrament as a community.)

(With the passing of the cup, please partake as soon as received as an expression of our personal relationship with Christ.)

Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Come! Live in the Light!" GtG 749

**1. Come! Live in the light!
Shine with the joy
and the love of the Lord!
We are called
to be light for the kingdom,
to live in the freedom
of the city of God.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

**2. Come! Open your heart!
Show your mercy
to all those in fear!
We are called
to be hope for the hopeless
so hatred and violence
will be no more.**

(continued...)

**We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

**3. Sing! Sing a new song!
Sing of that great day
when all will be one!
God will reign,
and we'll walk with each other
as sisters and brothers
united in love.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

Words and Music (WE ARE CALLED): David Haas, 1988
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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