

## **Epiphany: Following A Star and Star Words**

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12 (selected verses)

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Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.  
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
Lift 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.  
Then 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.  
A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

*Isaiah 60:1-6*

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."*

*Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."*

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.*

*On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

*Matthew 2:1-2, 7-11*

Today we are celebrating Epiphany. This is an ancient Christian celebration, dating at least as far back as the 300's. And it is on January 6 the church has celebrated the arrival of the magi, or scholars or astrologers, the Eastern Wise men who came to visit Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Sometimes it is called Three Kings Day. The actual feast day of Epiphany, which is also, if you count it up, the 12th Day of Christmas.

This word comes to us almost directly from the Greek. “*Epi*”, meaning ‘on’ or ‘upon’, and “*phaneros*”, which means ‘visible’, ‘apparent’ or ‘manifest’.

So, an epiphany is more than just a “lightbulb” moment, or an “aha!” moment. An epiphany is something that is revealed to you. Something where light shines and makes something clear and manifest. The magi received the epiphany for all of us. They saw God made flesh and saw salvation for all people.

“*Lift up your eyes and look around*”, Isaiah tells the people. Isaiah gives a promise to people who have been defeated, exiled and forced to pay homage to other kings—he gives them a vision of kings coming to pay homage to them.

*Nations shall come to your light  
And kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

For people in Israel who grew up hearing Isaiah’s promises, people who were living under occupation themselves, the image of men from the east, offering a vision.

***Arise! Shine! For your light as come! The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.***

Perhaps that was the greatest gift the magi offered—**hope**. Their very presence reminded the people of long held promises and invited them to see the world in new ways.

**Arise! Shine! Your light has come!**

Isaiah’s prophecy in this section is full of imperatives. It is full of exclamation points! He isn’t inviting the hearers to join in. He’s commanding it. It’s a good reminder to us in the darkness of winter. We can’t just sit around, waiting for the darkness of the world to change.

And Isaiah’s audience knew all about the shadows of the world. They knew the despair of exile. They knew what it was like to look around and say “the problems are so big. What can one person do?”

There is a not short list of what we might say that about today. And we want to follow the star, to see what God is doing in the world, but what difference can it make if we see it? What are we supposed to do differently in this new year to make a difference?

After the Christmas season ends, right about when we’re pining for a fresh start, sweeping dead pine needles and putting away Christmas decorations, the American holiday season of “Resolution” arrives. Lucky for us, beginning January 1, every diet pill, nicotine patch, organizing gizmo, life coach app, health club membership, lean meal plan, self-help book and storage container is on sale.

Somehow I don't think the "Joy to the world! Christ has come!" is about all that. Jesus came to share this life with us. Love Incarnate, body and spirit knit together. Christ joins our life and dies our death so nothing can separate us from God's love. God is here with us now, as we are, however we are. And when we're disillusioned from the season, we might choose to observe a different holiday than Resolution: Epiphany.

Epiphany, celebrating the Magi, the scholars from the East, who traveled for months on end led by a star and a promise to find the Creator of the world on the lap of a peasant woman. God has come for the whole world, and there is no going back.

Where Resolution begins with our fears and our failures, telling us to fix what's broken with ourselves, Epiphany comes right into our pain and fears, bringing possibilities and surprises from outside us. It summons us to where we might never otherwise have gone and connects us with people we might never otherwise have known. When we're open to epiphany we're likely to be transformed.

One way to celebrate the season of Epiphany is to start out the new year with a "star word." A star word is a random word that becomes a prayer guide, a focus, an intention, a way to watch for God. God can use anything to speak to us. There is nothing magic about a star word. But a star word begins as a mystery. You choose it out of a basket. And so, it invites investigation, attentiveness, waiting. A star word orients you to watch for God in a particular way, to be receptive to the Spirit who is moving right now in the world around you.

So often we race through life, striving and straining, pressing forward, oblivious to the beauty of those around us, the wonder of the natural world, and the presence of God right here in it all, nudging us toward joy. We stumble along, critical and ashamed, measuring ourselves against an unseen ideal. But life is a gift from God. God comes in to love and claim us all. The Holy Spirit is active in the world, and epiphany awaits. In our willingness to watch and openness to being met, we might begin to notice how the God who comes to share this life is actually sharing in our life.

Last year when we gathered for worship on New Year's Day, I passed out star words, inviting you to take a star and to let it be a reminder to you that God's light does shine in the darkness. We are going to do it again this year. After communion, before the last hymn Deacons will pass baskets to you.

Each card has a star and a word on it. I invite you to consider how that word might speak to your life in this new year. Perhaps you could use it to lead your prayers this year. Perhaps you could tape it to your refrigerator or bathroom mirror and when you see it, remember that you reflect how that word might show up and guide you. Perhaps it can set an intention for you. How might you lean into the word? Check in with yourself and each other from time to time, journaling or chatting – how is God meeting you through your star word this year?

There is no end to the resolutions we could make. We could always muster up a goal and get cracking. But instead, why not receive a star word and start watching? What if, instead of Resolution, we start our year in Epiphany?

Perhaps it can be your reminder that what you do with the light that has shined in your life does matter. So, Arise! Shine! For your light has come. Amen.

### **Resources**

Rev. Marci Glass, "Epiphany with Exclamation Points!" Jan. 6, 2013

<https://marciglass.com/2013/01/06/epiphany-with-exclamation-points/>

Rev. Kara Root, "Replacing Resolution: Welcoming the New Year with a different kind of practice," 12.13.23

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2023/12/replacing-resolution-welcoming-new-year.html>