

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14
Matthew 3: 1-12
Year C

St. Peter's Glenside
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January 3, 2021

Arise, Shine, for the Light Has Come

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Good morning, and Happy New Year! How energizing it is to say those three words. Happy New Year.

And how welcome those beautiful words from Isaiah feel this year, on this day, "Arise, shine for your light has come," as we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany and the end of a very dark year when fear, death, and despair loomed large.

It was a year to wonder if, given the choice, Jesus, taking a look at the world he was about to be born into might have said, "Thanks, I'll take a pass this time around."

But that's not the way the story goes, or the way God acts in the world. Epiphanies abound, in all our lives as feasts—momentous change—or as snacks that point the way and hint at change to come. The light continually breaks through in our lives and in our world to show us the way; stars are always beckoning, sometimes in broad daylight.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a young boy growing up in apartheid in South Africa in the 1930s when it was illegal for blacks and whites to associate in any way. Black lives didn't matter; black lives were crimes.

While walking with his mother, Tutu saw a white man tip his hat towards her. Never had Desmond seen such respect shown to a black woman by a white man. His mother said "He's a priest," and a spark was lit in Desmond Tutu, and kindled over the years until it burst into flame and the liberating and transforming love of Jesus Christ that has burned in him for decades. An epiphany moment lit the way.

An epiphany came for me bathed in moonlight in a dim, cluttered apartment on East 23rd Street in New York City back in 1991 when Jimmy, a dear college friend, was dying from AIDS. A friend and I were there before his emaciated body stark on the white sheets of his bed. The moon was full, the light luminous, and the silence, pure. An image I wasn't seeking came to me, of the women at the foot of the cross. The love in that dim bedroom was so profound, I knew beyond knowing that I was in the presence of God. I didn't set out to "do" anything or change. I was, at that time a TV producer. Yet there is no turning back when you see the face of God. I had found a place of belonging and without realizing it, began to follow a star I couldn't name, but something in my soul could see and my life began to *gradually* turn in a new direction. 15 years later, I would enter seminary although convinced I did not want to be ordained, worked as a hospital chaplain and pushed that back for 13 more years.

We tell the story of the Wise Men of one of adoration, which it is. But it is also, more powerfully, one of transformation. The Wise Men went, "home by another way" because of the power of what they had seen; they were transformed. We don't really quite know how or why, but that doesn't matter. They had seen the face of God which changed everything, just as it did for me on East 23rd Street.

Christmas pageants have reduced the three Wise Men to one dimensional figures. “We three Kings of Orient are bearing gifts we travel afar...” Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, and snazzy costumes in the pageants. The story, for most of us ends there.

Yet there is so much mystery, intrigue, and danger. We think of them as kings, and yet they most scholars think they were astrologers and magicians who followed a star that led them first to King Herod—a big dead-end. It was the Wise Men who tipped off Herod to the birth of a new king whom he immediately perceived as a threat. “Come back and tell me where he is” he ordered them to do.

But they didn’t. They returned “home by another way” because they were so transformed. They knew what they could not really know, that this baby Jesus born, in the filth of the manger, and not a royal palace, was about to transform the world as they knew it.

When the Wise Men didn’t return, Herod ordered all the children under two in Bethlehem to be slaughtered, determined to eliminate the baby who was already a threat. Jesus was a dead man walking before he could even walk. Those hundreds of dead children – remembered as The Holy Innocents on a grim Feast Day if there ever was one, was marked in the church last Sunday.

What strikes me is that the light of Christ, never eliminates death, despair, pandemics. The light comes into the world despite them, as it always has, reaching out relentlessly to us, urging us to travel “home by another way,” from the world’s ways of destruction, cruel tyrants, oppression and all of the violence and wreckage we humans persist in doing to each other and our planet.

And yet....arise, shine for your light has come...and once again we have followed the star that led us to the manger with Mary and her baby. It's a preposterous story but it is, as Christians, our story. Mary listened to an angel, the Magi followed a star, and Joseph was warned in a dream that he should flee with his family to Egypt to save their lives.

If only one of them said "but that makes no sense" we wouldn't be worshipping together 2,000 years later.

Yes, it can seem crazy to rejoice in the midst of a pandemic when 3 thousand Americans are dying every day, when millions more are unemployed, struggling with food insecurities when too many ICUs are filled to capacity and first responders, doctors and nurses have been pushed past the breaking point.

A death star hovered over 2020, but now we can begin to arise for our light has come in our savior, Jesus Christ. A vaccine, a new administration, the hope that our weary spirits deeply crave is being born into our world again and into each of our hearts.

Look deep into yourselves and the epiphanies in your own life that have, like the star, pointed the way. Those moments when you knew without knowing— that there was no turning back. Maybe it felt like a baby step. Maybe it was a candle instead of a star, maybe a flicker, a spark.

Follow it. And trust that it will lead you to a place beyond imagining, as it did me, who stands before you as a preposterous priest, never expecting that life would lead me from where I was to where I am now. I didn't know where I was going. But I knew, in a way beyond knowing, that after seeing the face of God, I was going home by another way; home into the heart of Jesus, a place I knew I belonged the moment I arrived.

AMEN