

“Arise, Shine...”

A Sermon by Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 2, 2021

Please read:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany is January 6th and is one of my favorite holidays. We sing “*We three kings of Orient are...following yonder star. O star of wonder, star of night, Star with Royal beauty bright; Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*” Coincidentally, the Jim Webb telescope was launched Christmas Day and will deliver even more amazing images and data from galaxies far, far away. It is one of the few bright spots in a world full of division. They built parts of the telescope in red states and tested them in blue ones. The European Union and Russia are facing off about Ukraine, but scientists from both sides will enjoy the data from this project for years to come. Supply chains were disrupted around the world, but parts were assembled in multiple nations and tested here before the launch in French Guiana. Even in the 21st century we can still find meaning revealed to us in the stars.

Epiphany, otherwise known as the *Feast of the Wise Men*, marks the end of the 12 Days of Christmas and begins a new season in the church calendar which is about what Epiphany literally means, “manifestation.” The Wise Men are the last members of the nativity cast we consider. The Bible calls these men “Magi”, the word for the priestly caste of the Near East regions of Media and Persia. They were probably Zoroastrians, students of the stars, or astrologers. They were the scientists of their time, following their knowledge in the pursuit of truth. But there is a disconnect in the story for me that is significant...

We may admire the wise men for many things: their scientific prowess, their shrewdness in human relations, their good taste in gifts. I especially love the detail in the story that like the shepherds in Luke’s birth narrative, the magi were *overwhelmed with joy* when they realized their search was complete... But what strikes me as singularly peculiar about these distant journeyers for the church and for us today is the fact that *they were strangers*.

They really don't belong at the manger; and so, when they have finished their business, when they concluded their worship, they returned home. The wise men are foreigners (Iranians, actually!), intruders on the manger scene. They are Gentiles, non-Jews, people outside of the ancient covenants of Israel, men with no apparent claim upon God, and people with whom God has no apparent covenant relationship.

The Hebrew term for “gentile” is “goyim,” and the Greek term is “ethnikos,” both terms which have acquired a rather negative connotation. By the time of Christ, the historian Tacitus says that for the Jews to call someone a “gentile” was like to regard them “with all the hatred of enemies.”¹ So it is these first *ethnikos*, these first stranger *magi* whose presence at the manger proclaims to the world that the secret, hidden, obscure Christ is secret, hidden, and obscure no more: the child in the manger, who would in short time grow up to be the man nailed to a cross for the sins of the world; this little child in the manger is God's means to worldwide redemption, and it is not the angels, not

¹ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

the shepherds, nor even the holy family itself - but these outsiders, foreigners, Gentiles, who reveal this truth for all of us to hear and understand.

The wise men serve more than some exotic purpose in the Christmas narrative. They are more than spectators in God's cosmic drama. They are *our* representatives, far more so than ever the shepherds or the angels could be. They represent *us* because, like us, they are outsiders, Gentiles, and by rights wouldn't receive the revelation of God's good news of the newborn King were it not for the tender mercy of God. We then, we are the Gentiles, and the Epiphany, "the appearing" of Christ to the Gentiles, is in some very particular and peculiar way *our celebration*.

The prophet Isaiah recognized that the good news of God's redemption was for all people. This light was promised first to the Jews but would draw all nations to its beauty and joy. Of course, it wasn't clear to Isaiah how that would take place, but the prophet declares with confidence that nonetheless the light would come and those who had been dispersed would be regathered and experience the glory of the Lord, and their hearts would be thrilled and rejoice.

But this is where it becomes a little dicey, a bit too risky for many of us. What of our sharing the Gospel with others? What does it look like to manifest the good news in our world today? Is it culturally condescending to even suggest that we have something that ought to be shared with others, not simply because it makes us feel good, but because it is good, true and beautiful and can bring healing and an overwhelming joy? Scripture teaches us plainly God so loved *the world* that God gave; it does not say part of the world, the west or the north...but *the world*.

Perhaps it will be strangers to us who will teach us? Archbishop Desmond Tutu died this past week, and South Africa continues in mourning the death and celebrating of the life of this great leader and the first black Bishop of South Africa. Kim and I had the chance to hear him speak at CSU in 2003 and I have grown to appreciate and respect this courageous leader for his singular commitment to restorative justice and forgiveness that is at the heart of the gospel. The goal of restorative justice, the Archbishop said, is "the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships" and rehabilitating the victim and the perpetrator, with the latter "given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offense."² This is what shalom looks like, the way it's supposed to be. Retributive justice carries with it vengeance and perpetuates a culture of hatred. Restorative justice brings healing, restoration, and reconciliation. This is why the Archbishop was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

One of my favorite stories is about how Desmond became a priest. His father was publicly humiliated by a white policeman who called him "boy." But one day Tutu and his mother were walking on a sidewalk when a tall white man approached on the sidewalk from the opposite direction. In apartheid South Africa white supremacy dictated that the black mother and child should step off the sidewalk to let the white man pass without having to acknowledge them. So, Tutu was shocked when the white man stepped into the street and doffed his hat to his mother as

² Michael Eric Dyson, "Where is the Forgiveness and Grace in Cancel Culture?" (*New York Times*, December 28, 2021).

he passed them. The tall white man was wearing a black suit and a clerical collar, and the young Tutu regained a modicum of trust in the church as a witness to justice.

Tutu was committed to interfaith dialogue and one of his trademarks was to hold interfaith services at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, a city that has a range of Christian denominations, as well as many Muslims and Jews. At one such event, a Christian preacher cried out to the worshippers, "When are you going to give your life to Jesus?" The mischievous Tutu turned to the Muslim clerics and rabbis seated next to him and said, "I think he's speaking to you."

There are many stories of this 5'5" moral giant's courage and commitment to non-violence; saving a young man who was about to be publicly executed because he was accused of collaboration with the government, or standing up to armed troops who entered his cathedral at a mass, continuing to pray even when troops surrounded him threateningly, heading up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission... criticizing not only the white apartheid government for their corruption, but also the African National Congress when they had moral lapses...

After Tutu's death on Sunday, the current Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, released a statement: "His legacy is moral strength, moral courage and clarity. He felt with the people. In public and alone, he cried because he felt people's pain. And he laughed — no, not just laughed, he cackled with delight — when he shared their joy."³

What better way to begin this New Year than to remember and reflect on the cosmic dimensions of God's purposes of redemption and reconciliation, and that part of our calling, like the grace given to the prophet Isaiah is to bring to the Gentiles the good news of God's great and boundless love, a love that means giving oneself, committing to the pursuit of a better life and fairer world for all people?

I think that's what it means to "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" To live differently, to live into that vision of forgiveness, restorative justice, of love for all people.

The small detail at the very end of the magi story has always fascinated me. After giving their gifts and paying homage, the Magi *left by another way home*. Consider that when God's heavenly love has touched your heart, you cannot remain the same. When you bow down and pay homage to the King, you will be changed; in your thinking, speaking and actions. It means you will no longer pursue the ways of violence and domination. It's not a part of our reading, but it is a part of the story. King Herod, when he heard about the newborn King, sent troops to slaughter the children of Bethlehem in a vain attempt to secure power.

Might makes right and an eye for an eye is the way of the world. It's the way of retributive justice. Not so with those who have given their lives to Christ. His way is different... So consider how you are called to a new way of showing God's love to your neighbors, even your enemies: It doesn't

³ NPR report of December 25, 2021, referenced December 28, 2021:
<https://www.npr.org/2021/12/26/1047748076/desmond-tutu-dead-remembrance>

have to be complicated! Kierkegaard once said that simple “mercy has converted more souls than zeal, eloquence, or learning, or all of them put together!”

As we come to the table, consider finally that here is where the stars of heaven focus most brightly... The table reminds us of restorative justice, where heaven conquered hell, and where heavenly self-giving love was revealed its power even over the worst hatred and violence. When you go out on a clear night and see a star, remember like those first strangers, God will still lead, reveal, give joy, and empower even *you* to reflect the Light of Christ’s love for all people... So, friends, siblings in Christ: Arise, shine...for your light has come!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.