

“Arise, Shine!”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

January 5th, 2020

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. *(NRSV)*

Today in many parts of the Christian household we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany and we hear this passage from Matthew's Gospel--the story of wise men from the East searching out and finding the Christ Child. The word '*epiphany*' simply means '*showing*' or '*shining forth*.' Divine light *shines forth* from this Child.

But it should *not so much* be understood as the appearance of God as the *transparence* of God. You see, the divine light that shines in the Child is *not* a foreign light to the earth. It is the Light at the *heart* of *all* life. It is the Light from which *all* things come.

If somehow this Light were *extracted* from the universe (according to Astrophysicists), *everything* would cease to exist. So this is a story about the Light *at the heart of everything*, the Light *at the heart of you*, the Light at the heart of *me*.¹

Look around you *now* at the *people* next to you, at the *life forms* growing from the earth, at the *radiance* of the sun or the *whiteness* of the moon. And look also into *your own heart*. There in all things is the *Light*. Maybe it is deeply hidden under confusions or false-nesses. But it is there, waiting to come forth anew. In the Christ Child this Light shines. He is our *epiphany*, our *showing*. In him we *see* the Light of life.

This reminds me of the story that the prophet, Nahum, told. It is the story of the burning bush in the Hebrew Scriptures in which Moses sees a bush on fire, but the bush is not consumed. Nahum says that the important thing about this story is *not* that the bush is burning but that Moses *notices*, because every bush is burning, *every* bush is on fire with the divine presence, *everything* in the universe shines because God is at the heart of it.

So it is in our epiphany story. It is a story that invites us to *open our eyes* to the light that is everywhere.²

There are **three things** that particularly strike me in our reading. The **first** is that it is a story about following stars and paying attention to dreams. Is this not pretty different from how most of us in the Western world have been trained to see?

The **second** thing is that this is a story about finding light way beyond the boundaries of what is familiar to us, beyond the boundaries of our nation, beyond the boundaries of our religion. Is this not pretty challenging to the tight lines in which so many of us have been reared?

And the **third** thing is that this is a story about enormous risk, because the Light that the wise men find is a threat to the political power of the day. Is this not pretty disturbing to those of us who belong to the world's most politically powerful nations?

¹ John Phillip Newell, *The Light Within All Life*, "Day1, January 6th, 2013

² Ibid.

Let's turn our attention to the *first* feature of the story, the following of stars and dreams. How can we be sure about paying attention to such signs in our lives?

According to John Phillip Newell, (the former Director of the Iona Community), in the *Celtic world*, there is the practice of what is called *reading from the two books of God--the big book and the little book*. The *big book* refers to the universe, to the creatures, to everything that has been spoken into being. 'In the beginning was the Word,' says St John, and all things have come into being through the Word. Or in the beginning was the *Sound*, as some of our other teachers put it, and the Sound was with God and the Sound was God. Everything is essentially a sounding of God. The universe is like a *sacred vibration*, a living text that we can learn to read. And that includes the movement of the stars, the flowing of the seasons, the dreams of the night.

But there is also the *little book*, physically little, the book of Scripture (for Christians) in which we listen for God speaking to us through those who have gone before, our mothers and fathers in the faith. Their *experiences* of God, their *mistakes* and *failings*, as well as their *hopes* and *wisdom* are given to us so that we too can learn the way in which God speaks in the human heart and in human history.

And **what we** are invited to do is *listen* to these two books *in stereo*, to the big book and the little book. If we listen only to the little book (Scripture) and ignore the big book (Creation), we may miss the vastness of the utterance, God in *all* things.

And if we listen only to the big book (the expression of God in the universe) and ignore the little book (the word of God in scripture), we may miss the *intimacy* of the voice, God speaking in the secret places of the human heart.

The challenge is to listen in *both books*, and not just individually but in community, faithfully wrestling together to more deeply know the *Sound of God* and to *resound* with God, to **re-sound** God in our lives and relationships.

And what about the *second* feature of the story, the wise men going *beyond the boundaries* of their homeland to find Light?

Tragically we have often been given the impression that *we have all the light we need*, within *our* nation, within *our* religious tradition, within *our* cultural inheritance.

But our Gospel story points to something *radically different*, that there is Light *beyond* our inherited boundaries, and that we need this Light, that it is given to **complete** the Light we have received, not to **compete** with the Light we have received. We need one another as *nations* and *religions* as much as the species of the Earth need one another to be whole.

For example, as a young man John Phillip Newell spent time with *Bede Griffiths*, an *English Benedictine monk* who lived most of his life in India. In the East, in the wisdom and meditative practices of *Hinduism*, he found what he called '*the other half of his soul.*'

Like the wise men, he needed *to go beyond the boundaries* of his *homeland*, beyond the boundaries of his *inherited tradition*, in order to see more deeply, more truly.

And this leads to the *third* feature of our story, that it is about *risk, enormous risk.*

You see, the Light that the wise men find is a *threat* to the most powerful man in Judea (Herod), because the Light that the wise men find *is the Light at the heart of all life*, not just of some life, not just of certain people.

In other words, any *power structure* that favors only *some* rather than serving *all*, all people, all life, is a *false power*. It has no *ultimate* future. It will *collapse*. And at some level *false power* knows this. It always feels *threatened* by the shining of true Power, the power of *love*. "*Love-Force,*" as Mahatma Gandhi called it, "*Not Brute-Force.*"

Of course, we don't know what happened to the wise men. But my sense is that they would never have *regretted* the *risk* they took, they would never have regretted *crossing the boundaries* of their homeland, they would never have regretted *following* a star.³

Mary Oliver, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, in "*Six Recognitions of our Lord,*" writes of such a moment. "*Then,*" she says, "*I go back to ... my own house, my own life, which has now become **brighter** and simpler, somewhere I have never been before.*"

³ Ibid.

Perhaps the wise men in returning home *saw everything* more brightly. The Light they had found in a distant land turned out to be *the Light at the heart of their own land*. But now they saw it *as if* for the first time.

Shall we serve this Light together? Shall we bow to it in one another and every nation? It is the Light within all life.