

## Reflection on the Word: January 7, 2018 Isaiah 60:1-3, Psalm 72, Matthew 2:1-12

As children growing up, and into our teen years, my sister and I shared a room. On weekdays, we'd set our alarm clock to get us up in time for school, but on weekends the alarm was always turned off. Yet, I still remember those Saturday mornings, when our mother would call to us: "Rise and shine Time to get moving!" And with those words, we knew whatever plans we had for sleeping in were gone, and whatever work Mom had lined up for us, was waiting downstairs.

Epiphany is that time for the church - a time when we hear the voice of God calling us to "Rise and Shine! Time to get moving."

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek - meaning to manifest, or show forth. Yesterday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, was the actual feast of Epiphany, which commemorates the visit of the Magi. The symbol for Epiphany and the season that follows, is LIGHT. It is the light heralded by the prophet Isaiah who proclaims to the people, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." It is light that overcomes darkness. It is the light manifested in the star which led wise ones, astrologers from the East, to the Christ child. This is the time when we learn to let holy love shine through our lives, so it shows forth as Christ-light in the world. We learn from the life and ministry of Jesus how to share the love of God through spirit-filled compassion and prayerful service.

For many of us growing up in the church, Epiphany was not something we were familiar with - the United Church wasn't big on feast days and the calendar of the church year focused more on just the celebration of the high holy-days, like Christmas and Easter. Most of us didn't even know much about Lent, unless we had some good Catholic friends. Once the tree was down, the gifts put away, and the New Year begun, Christmas was over and we looked ahead to Easter!

Yet the popular Jim Strathdee hymn reminds us:

*"When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and the shepherds have found their way home,  
the work of Christmas is begun."*

Epiphany is that time which calls us to begin the work of Christmas - starting with the call to rise and shine ... to follow a star ... follow a child in whom God's purpose and will is revealed ... and in following, to make our journey into the year ahead as one marked by meaning, direction, and intention.

Our celebration of Epiphany begins with the story of wise men, astrologers from the East, looking up into the night sky and seeing a bright star. Most of us find enjoyment looking up at the stars. Perhaps you can relate to sitting under the stars with someone you love, or recall moments of profound awe and serenity as you gazed at the vastness of the heavens on a clear summer's night. Have

you ever reflected, though, on a simple fact about stars ... that they can be seen only against a backdrop of darkness?

As we close the Christmas season, we reflect on the graces of this special time of year. Perhaps we say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if every day were like Christmas ... if each day of the year were full of high spirits, generosity of heart, blessed with light and peace?" Many of us dream of a world where there is no bad news, no sadness or sickness, no stress or heartache ... a world filled with angel songs of promise and joy. We would love to have stars without the darkness. "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright."

But of course, life isn't like that. This is made clear for us, even in the visit of the Magi. Think of their encounter with Herod, the ruler who was threatened by the thought of a child born to be King, and was prepared to eliminate all newborn boys in order to protect his own right to power and privilege. Think of the gifts which the Magi offered to the child Jesus. They weren't your typical baby gifts.

These Wise Men are wiser than they know. They bring gifts that are loaded with meaning of which they can't be aware. They bring gold, a gift fit for a king, for one who will govern, will rule. The king born in the manger will rule by love, not by might, coercion, or terror. They bring frankincense, a gift fit for a priest, one who swings the smoking censor, the one who stands between heaven and earth, between God and people, presenting each to the other. They bring myrrh, a gift fit for a prophet, one who speaks and lives God's truth, though at a cost, that may entail death. The prophet sacrifices his life. Myrrh was used as a kind of embalming ointment.

The story of the presentation of the gifts of the Magi helps us to understand that in real life there is always the presence of both joy and sorrow, health and sickness, light and darkness. Denying the darkness is an exercise in futility. We need to have darkness to appreciate the light. Embracing the dark with the light, the bad with the good, is part of what it means to live and grow in wisdom.

But the wisdom doesn't end there. For we also have the ability to control our focus; we can choose what we look at. We can decide to look at stars or to look at the darkness. We can focus on the bad or the good that takes place in our lives or in our world. If we want to find fault with our spouses, our children, our friends, neighbours, and co-workers, we will. If we sustain loving thoughts, if we look for their good points, we are sure to find them. In the world, we can throw up our hands in despair over the grim statistics which announce increasing levels of violence and sexual inappropriateness, prejudice and racial insult, poverty and homelessness, or we can join the struggle with those who are working on the front lines, we can advocate with political leaders and decision-makers, to bring a measure of hope and make a difference.

Life is made or broken by what we consistently choose to look at: the stars or

the darkness. A lesson that bears constant repeating is that happiness and inner peace often depends on little more than a simple shift in focus. We don't pretend the darkness doesn't exist; but like the wise men, we can choose to concentrate on the stars, on the light.

Are you a star-gazer? Do you look for light in any darkness that confronts you? Do you search out a problem for its opportunity?

Some time ago, I came across the story of a small five year old boy who was very proud of the fact that he could say his prayers by himself. One night, while checking on him, his parents overheard him saying, "God bless Mommy, God bless Daddy, God bless my dog Lucky, God bless Grandma ...". He paused a moment, then continued, "And please take care of yourself, God, cause if anything happens to you, we're all sunk."

Epiphany reminds us that the light which is God's in Christ is with us – we're not sunk! The light shines and the darkness has not overcome it.

But what are the guiding stars that give people hope? That serve as a compass for their lives? What are the guiding points that bring people to living in the way of Christ in this day and age?

That's the question which we in the church need to ponder.

And I believe that when we follow the example of Jesus' life and ministry, when we allow Christ to become our guiding star, then the guiding points which we will offer, which will help others to 'see', are things like compassion, forgiveness, generosity of spirit, care for the needy, delivery of the poor, work for justice, help for those who have no helpers. For these are the things which will show forth the light of God's love for all people.

Following the star to Bethlehem was not the end of the Magi's journey, nor is it ours. Bethlehem is just the beginning. Matthew tells us the wise men were overwhelmed with great joy; they bowed down and worshipped the child, and presented him with richest gifts. And then they went back into the night, and continued their journey home ... by another way. Because they had seen not only the star in the East, but the grace of God in a young child. A new light had dawned for them. Their lives were given new direction.

The Magi have gone home by another route. It is up to us now. It is up to us to decide what this child's birth really means. It is up to us to present and use our gifts, to answer the call to discipleship and service. Through God we have been given a choice, like Herod, to turn away from the Christ in silent hostility, threatened by his radiant light. Or to turn toward him, and like the Magi, who saw in him the light of life, bow down and worship.

This Sunday, the first after Epiphany, celebrates that in Christ, we have been given our guiding star ... A light to enlighten our paths as we journey into a new year and into the ministry and witness of the rest of our lives. What gifts will you bring to the work that is both God's and ours? Let's rise and shine ... it's time to get going!

Amen.