

## LET LIGHT LEAD

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

January 5, 2025

Perhaps you have noticed that life these days has a kind of apocalyptic feel to it—a sense of consistent unraveling, persistent chaos, daily reminders that all is not well within us or around us in the world. I've noticed that even politicians and secular writers are using language that has an unnervingly Biblical tone. Last week I listened to a podcast conversation from the McKinsey Global Institute on this unsettling question: "Is the World Facing a State of Permacrisis?" Not a word I hoped to learn on vacation. And spoiler alert: basically, yes. The answer is yes, we are.

And so, the hope and joy of Christmas has come and gone, a new year has begun, and the difficult truth we must face is that much about our lives and the world feels the same. Same grim headlines greeting this new calendar year. Same senseless violence in our cities and around the globe. And, just when we are most tempted to give in and give up to the post-Christmas blues and communal despair, here's the church offering us one more holy day. When the night feels darkest and the days are shortest, we are reading and singing and preaching about the durability of light. With all due respect, the timing of this day seems at best paradoxical and perhaps even ill-advised.

And yet, the church *insists* on Epiphany. A striking revelation. A sudden insight. An unexpected discovery. Mine usually come in the middle of the night or in the shower. I have always been grateful that I was ordained a pastor on Epiphany, seventeen years ago tomorrow. You might say that I am vocationally obligated to look for the light. Each Epiphany, we renew our reading of this ancient story, this story of three mysterious seekers, we call them magi, or kings, or wise men. We only know the direction from which they are from and not the place. We don't know their names, and frankly we don't know how many of them there were. We

know that they traveled from a faraway place, that they followed an inexplicably bright star, that they ended up in the humble place where the Christ child was. We love this story. It is a compelling tale. There's the vision. The prophecy. The dream. The political intrigue. The journey. The star. The gifts.

What does it mean to mark this day of light in the grip of winter's chill? What does it mean to celebrate Epiphany in the bleakness of midwinter? It means choosing again, each year, to follow the light. It means making a decision at the commencement of the calendar. Making a decision to let light lead no matter how faint that light might seem. It means trusting, renewing our pledge, like the magi, trusting that the journey is worth every step.

Epiphany is the testament to the church's conviction that the story of Christmas does not end at the manger. That the journey continues. This story each year asks that we, as wise ones, keep following the light.

I believe that we who are in the grip of the post-Christmas letdown can take comfort in the story of these three. When Jesus was born, they missed it entirely. They were still many miles off, months away. They were duped by King Herod, and surely they dealt with all of the complications and difficulties of holiday travel. How many of us can relate? Truly, can you relate? Were you longing to the core of your being to experience some unexpected surge of joy this Christmas but simply could not get there in time? Perhaps you need another chance to welcome the light.

If so, then let this story speak to you. Let it tell its truth that it is not too late. You see, what distinguishes these magi is not their punctuality but their persistent trust in a deeper call, in a brighter light. They did not give up and neither should you. When your journey feels

longest or the joy of Christmas feels most distant, trust the light that leads you.

And so, though delayed, when the magi finally make their way to the child, when their Christmas moment finally arrives in January, they are ready. They kneel before the one whom they have been seeking these many months. They offer their gifts, the very best that they have, to Jesus. And then, having made their offering, together they make their way toward home by another path.

You see, the seeking does not stop when they find the Christ child. There is still more to discover. More to find. More to follow. This encounter is not an end but a new beginning for this trio. Their moment of epiphany, insight, and revelation calls them to keep searching. Changed by their encounter with the holy, they set out again. And their message is this: we too can be led by the light through the challenges of the year ahead.

You see, friends, the light shining in the darkness that we welcomed on Christmas morning has not gone out. But it has gone on. If we want to be those who walk in the light of Christ, we must follow that light into an unknown future. So, a piece of pastoral guidance: keep those Christmas lights up in your homes and in your yards. Keep lighting the candles. Fan the flames of hope against the gathering darkness. Choose to live in the light. And this year, keep on shining.

Yes, there will be moments this year, as every year, when you will be tempted to give in to the despair. In those moments, there is another choice. Yours to make. The choice is this: what will lead your way? Will you be led by the understandable impulse to hunker down or the temptation to lash out in anger and frustration? Will you be guided by the predictions of pessimistic prognosticators? Or will you let light lead?

One of my favorite stories comes from the Native American tradition. It's about an old Cherokee elder telling his grandson about a battle that is going on inside of him in every moment. He describes that fight being between two wolves. One of the wolves is evil. It is envy and greed. It is self-pity and false pride. It is ego and anger. It is hatred and vengeance. The other wolf is

good. It is joy, peace, love, serenity, humility, kindness, compassion, faith. The grandfather describes the wolves in detail. The grandson, thinking about it for a moment, asks his grandfather, "Grandfather, which wolf wins?" The old man replies, "The one I feed." Friends, this year you will have a choice. Which path will you follow? Which wolf will you feed?

Yes, epiphany is a day of celebration. And we have something to celebrate today at Second Church. Today, gathered as a congregation, as a community of faith, we give thanks for the gift of God's call in the life of Rev. Gracie Payne, as we install her to the position of Associate Pastor. Since Gracie arrived among us as a Lake Fellow in the summer of 2019, she has been a light in this congregation and in the broader community. You know this well. You know that Pastor Gracie brings an abundance of gifts to the work to which God has called her. This deep sense of God's presence and a compulsion to share that joy with others. A creative mind and a compassionate heart. A profound gift for crafting words that speak God's truth in compelling ways to those within and beyond the church. And perhaps above all, this innate, God-given capacity to create Christ-centered community. Gracie is a gatherer, a convener, of people. And Gracie, we honor these gifts as we install you this morning, on the fifth anniversary of your ordination here at Second. But the celebration of an installation, like the celebration of Epiphany, is also a call to collective faith.

I've been thinking this week about how all the stories we tell this time of year are centered on the truth that we belong to one another. In the Christmas story, no one acts independently. There is no lone Christmas ranger. Think of it. The stories of the angelic *chorus*, the *band* of shepherds, the *three* (or more) magi. They remind us that God is not found as the result of a purely personal journey. And here at the start of a new year, they tell us that faith is not a self-improvement resolution or an effort at individual advancement. We go together. Our epiphanies occur in communities.

In just a few moments, Gracie will feel the warmth and the weight of many hands, resting on her shoulders. The purpose of Epiphany is transformation—not individually, but in community. In this era of permacrisis,

it is a bold pledge to be led by the light that draws us together. To go, together.

Speaking of going, Matthew says that the magi, following the instructions of a dream, return home by another way. I have always loved that detail in this story. I think it began when my father, imitating the magi, would drive the four of us children home from the local live nativity using an alternate route. The minivan would become our camel, and together we would travel roads previously unknown to us back home. Home by another way. I can only imagine that these magi returned home as new people, that somehow that place to which they returned did not look the same. How could it? Having seen this light, this child, how could they not be changed?

In his extraordinary set of poems titled, *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot writes:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling  
We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And to know the place for the first time.

Gracie, we celebrate this beginning, this arrival in the place where you started. We rejoice in the voice that has called you here.

Second Church, it's up to us to listen eagerly, attentively, for that same voice in our life. This year, we will be faced with choices. There will be moments when old fears return and new ones emerge, times when despair urges us to retreat or withdraw under the weight of our worry. In these moments, it is a bold choice to live in the light. To choose hope over cynicism. Connection over isolation. Compassion over anger. Courage over apathy.

This year, let light lead as together we walk the path of faith. Amen.