

Scripture:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

“Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

This Advent and Christmas I’ve spent some time reading the book “Kneeling in Bethlehem” by Ann Weems.

“Kneeling in Bethlehem” is a collection of poems about Advent Christmas and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ during these seasons.

And today like a number of messages in the past 6 weeks we open with a poem from “Kneeling in Bethlehem.”

Star-Giving --- by Ann Weems.

Fitting for the day that marks the end of the Christmas season --- Epiphany -- and the wise men coming to see baby Jesus guided by God’s star in the sky.

Star-Giving.

“What I’d really like to give you for Christmas is a star.....

Brilliance in a package,
something you could keep in the pocket of your jeans
or in the pocket of your being.

Something to take out in times of darkness ,
something that would never snuff out or tarnish,
something you could hold in your hand,
something for wonderment,
something for pondering,
something that would remind you of
what Christmas has always meant:
God’s Advent Light into the darkness of this world.

But stars are only God’s for giving,
and I must be content to give you words and wishes and packages without
stars.

But I can wish you life as radiant as the Star
that announced the Christ Child's coming,
and as filled with awe as the shepherds who stood
beneath its light.

And I can pass on to you the love
that has been given to me,
ignited countless times by others
who have knelt in Bethlehem's light.

"Perhaps, if you ask, God will give you a star."

"Perhaps, if you ask, God will give you a star."

Well --- that's precisely what God did ---- didn't He.

He gave a star --- a light to the world --- **the** light to the world even.

Clearly the Magi were looking for something ---- clearly there must have
been a restlessness in their hearts --- they were looking for some kind of
direction in life --- and they finally found it.

God gave them a star.

And they followed.

Harkening back to Abraham ---- and Moses --- and of course Isaiah ---- as
our Old Testament reading and its cry of ---- "Arise, shine, for your light has
come" ----- clearly proclaims ----- people were looking and waiting for a
light to guide them and save them.

And finally it came in Jesus Christ.

And it came not just for Jews and Jerusalem --- but for the world over as the
wise men make clear.

As I prepared this past week ----- I kept thinking to myself ----- wouldn't it
make a whole lot of sense to read the passages of scripture that we often
associate with Palm Sunday on this ---- Epiphany Sunday?

Epiphany Sunday --- is all about ----- fittingly enough ---- an Epiphany ---- a realization --- an eye opening --- a coming to understand ----- an “aha” moment.

Specifically the coming to understand ----- that the child born in a stable was not just any child ---- but the Christ child --- the light of the world --- the long awaited Messiah.

So doesn't it make sense to hear passages and proclamations like -----

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven.”

and

“Sing Hosanna ---- sing Hosanna --- to the King of kings.”

Yes ----- “Arise, shine for your light has come.”

For sure

Our light --- the light of the world has come.

But why not also ----

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven.”

and

“Sing Hosanna ---- sing Hosanna --- to the King of kings.”

Because this child has come in the name of the Lord ---- and this child is the King of kings.

The King at whose feet all other kings bow down to worship ---- as the traveling magi demonstrate in Matthew's gospel reading today.

And not only the King at whose feet all other kings bow down to worship --- but the King --- at whose feet all people ultimately will come to worship ---- king --- queen --- ruler --- ruled ----- master ----- slave --- peasant --- land owner ---- rich and poor alike ----- all people.

In Matthew's gospel today we get a sense of the great power struggle and clash of wills that Jesus' birth initiated.

King Herod --- the king of Judea ---- was threatened by Jesus' birth and feared a usurper in this little baby boy.

Herod didn't like that these traveling wise men came to visit the one who --- as verse 2 from Matthew's gospel reading today says had ---- "been born king of the Jews."

And of course Herod had good reason to fear --- because this little boy would in fact --- usurp Roman power ---- indeed all notions of power --- and so much more as well.

Where power --- authority ----- might ---- and ruthless violent rule was the way of Herod's kingship --- Jesus comes ---- and redefines it.

For Jesus kingship is all love --- compassion ---- and self giving.

With the birth of the new kind of King there comes a huge shift of power --- and Herod knows it --- and he doesn't like it one bit.

That people came who had nothing to gain from coming to worship this little child --- that foreign kings came to give gifts and bow down and recognize this little boy as King ----- signaled a huge shift in power and authority.

A shift from Caesar and Herod ----- to Jesus --- tiny as He was.

And Herod wasn't about to sit back idly while his power shifted away from him.

If we read on past our passage from Matthew's gospel today ---- we see Herod's attempt to retain his power and might and influence and authority -- - by having all boys born in and around Bethlehem killed off.

In an attempt to make sure that this king of the Jews is killed off Herod orders all baby boys born in and around Bethlehem slaughtered.

But of course this King --- and this Kingship --- is of another nature and cannot be killed off ---- controlled ---- or manipulated by human hands as the gospel story soon shows.

The arrival of the Magi --- these foreign wise men ---- brings with it the understanding to the rest of the world that things will never be the same again.

There is a new standard ----- a new authority --- a new power --- a new --- way of being ---- in our midst in this little boy who will be King --- King of the Jews and then some.

The whole story that Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't begins to unfold with the arrival of the magi.

With the arrival of the magi it begins to become clear that Jesus will be Lord and Herod won't be for very much longer.

With the arrival of the Magi it begins to unfold that no one except Jesus Himself --- will have the kind of Lordship and authority that Herod was now enjoying.

This whole event --- what we call the Epiphany ----- changes everything.

Because of it --- because of these foreign kings coming to worship a rival king ---- we can say ---

Jesus is Lord and not Herod.

Jesus is Lord and not Caesar.

Jesus is Lord and not Mohammad.

Jesus is Lord and not Justin Beiber or Rob Ford.

Put another way ----- just as it was a bit of a shock when these wise men gathered at the manger ----- so it can be a bit of a shock to think of who else might one day bow down to the boy in the manger as the wise men did.

Scripture does say ----- “that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.” ----
Philippians 2:10.

The wise man gathering at the manger was a quite a shock.

So much so that Herod goes on a killing rampage ---- in hopes of eliminating
this would be king before he grows up ----- “the massacre of the innocents”.

It can be quite the shock as to who gathers at the manger.

More and more manger scenes around the world are becoming controversial.

Along with Mary --- Joseph ---- the baby Jesus --- some sheep and shepherds
----- there are also homeless people ---- beggars and down trodden types ----
the kind of people Jesus often spent time with.

The sinner type --- tax collectors --- prostitutes ----- tanners ---- the
Samaritan woman at the well --- the Syrophenician woman and her
daughter ----- blind Bartimaeus ---- and so on.

We have an ornament on our Christmas tree that has Santa Claus bowing at
the foot of the manger.

It can be strange and shocking to think of who might gather at the manger ---
-- at the feet of Christ.

Imagine what it would look like to have say serial killers like ----- Paul
Bernardo --- Ted Bundy --- and Clifford Olson gathering around the manger.

What about the image of rulers and politicians like Julius Caesar ---- Herod
the Great ----- Napoleon --- Joseph Stalin ---- Fidel Castro ----- Adolph
Hitler --- Robert Mugabe ---- and so on gathered around the manger.

Or common criminals like Phu Lam ---- the man who killed 7 people and
then himself in Edmonton this past week ----- or Justin Bourque the man
who killed 3 RCMP officers in Moncton and shot 2 others last June.

It was a shock to see the Magi gathered around Jesus.

And it can be a bit of a shock to think about certain other people gathered around Jesus too.

But part of the power of the Magi ---- part of the power of Epiphany ----- is that Jesus is for all ---- and it's all too easy for the awesome universality of Christ to be watered down in sentimentality and personal comfort.

Christ coming ----- the Magi gathering ----- “Arise, shine, your light has come.” ----- is all about a radical call to discipleship based on the transformative and saving power of Jesus Christ that all started in that little manger.

Somehow the Magi got it --- and threw caution to the wind --- and went to see what it was all about.

God gave the Magi a star ---- a shining light to guide them.

We don't ever really know why it was that they were drawn to Jesus we just know that they responded.

The star rose and shone and they responded.

And God gives us a star to guide us too ---- the light of the world ---- Jesus Christ.

And like the Magi we too are proclaim Him as King and bring gifts ---- bring our whole lives --- to His feet and offer ourselves to Him.

Whatever the gift may be that we bring ----- humble --- simple ----- seemingly small gift --- or a little bit bigger gift ---- gold ---- frankincense and myrrh.

Whatever it is that God has blessed us with ----- we are called to come and lay it at the feet of Jesus.

Lay it at the feet of Jesus that He might take it and employ it for purposes way beyond our capabilities --- and our imagination even.

The story we have retold before us in Matthew's gospel today --- is that Jesus is Lord and Herod isn't.

The story reminds us that things have changed ---- and earthly rule is now secondary ----- there is a new King and a new Kingdom.

Until the Magi came there wasn't any signal or symbol to the outside world that this little boy was anything special ---- up until now only Mary and Joseph and perhaps a few shepherds had any clue that this little guy was something special.

Now thanks to these traveling wise men all that has changed.

“Arise --- shine ---- your light has come.”

Aren't just ancient words ----- meant for a few wise men from the East --- and a couple of shepherds.

“Arise --- shine ---- your light has come.”

Are great and powerful words meant for each and every one of us here today.

Something special happened a few thousand years ago on the Judean hillside.

People came from near and far ----- people who had nothing to gain came.

They came because God led them --- and then they worshipped and they offered treasures.

Oh that we would be like the wise men ---- and respond to God's light shining in the darkness --- leading us to Christ --- and inviting us to turn and leave changed.

The very last line from Matthew's gospel reading today goes this way ----
“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another road.”

“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another road.”

In other words after encountering Jesus ---- things changed --- they changed.

God directed them not to do as they had planned to do ----- go back to Herod and tell him where the baby born to be King was --- and instead leave by another route.

Any true encounter with Christ ----- leaves us changed ----- returning by another route if you like ----- taking a different way.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come” ----- is a call to be changed and lead a different life.

It's that time of year where people make New Year's resolutions ----- make lists of things they are going to do differently.

Forget New Year's resolutions --- make faith resolutions --- resolutions based on what you believe --- rather than just a calendar or New Year.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come.” ---- is a call to do things differently - --- it's a call to do things more Christ like.

It's a faith resolution.

This year --- and of course beyond as well ---- may we all Arise ----- and shine ----- celebrating the truth that our light has come.

And His name is Jesus Christ ---- and because of Him nothing will ever be the same again.

Because of Christ --- death is a doorway instead of anything final.

Because of Christ --- suffering is passing and not eternal and lasting.

Because of Christ pain --- as real as it can be --- is fleeting --- temporal.

Because of Christ ----- all will be well – ultimately.

Because of Christ --- reconciliation where it seems impossible --- peace in the deepest age old battles.

Because of Christ ----- hope in the darkest hour.

Love in the most unlikely of places.

That's the message of the manger.

Because of Christ anything and everything --- all this is good and true and just is possible.

All because of Christ --- all beginning on that hillside in Judea --- where shepherds and wise men gathered to worship and praise and give thanks.

Our response?

Simple ---- "Arise, shine, for our light has come."

Amen.