

First Reading – John 1:1, 10-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

The twelfth day of Christmas was yesterday, which is also known liturgically as Epiphany. **Epiphany**, comes from the Greek meaning "manifestation," of a divine or supernatural being. Epiphany marks the celebration of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi – We Three Kings as we sang last week. Yet, Epiphany cannot be relegated to the history pages any more than Christmas or Easter. The manifestation of God, whom we know most fully through Christ, is an everyday occurrence, for God is with us. It is just a matter of whether we lift up our eyes and look around!

Although today is the 13th day after Christmas, I decided to linger in the Christmas Season and use the theme of Epiphany for our message this morning. I believe Epiphany is the message we need to heed as a whole church, as we begin our second year together. Listen now for God's word to us through the prophet Isaiah:

Second Reading – Isaiah 60:1-6

¹ Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Epiphany services occurred worldwide yesterday from Spain to Bulgaria, from Rome to Mexico City, from Prague to Athens. Some celebrations took place on Friday night and others on Saturday morn, including the swim for Orthodox Christians in the Mediterranean. Listen to some of the closing words of Pope Francis' Epiphany

message: "If we want to find Jesus [like the Magi], [then] we have to overcome our fear of taking risks."

I so appreciated his words as we begin this New Year. The Church with a capital "C" has to overcome our fear of taking risks. And this church, can no longer play it safe. We must learn to take risks for the sake of the gospel. We must risk and risk again, trusting that as we risk leaping first that God will give us wings. Francis continued saying, "We have to overcome our self-satisfaction and our indolent refusal to ask anything more of life." We all know we so easily settle for what is. We so easily do the same old same old or the path of least resistance. Yet, this settling for less than what life can be, is not God's vision for the church of Christ.

I hear the echoes of Francis' challenging words in our scripture this morning, "Arise, shine!" Don't just do what you always have. Get up and radiate God's glory! I hear Francis' words in the hymn we just sang, "Show forth the glory of your God...God's power will make you strong." Francis' concluded his Epiphany message saying, "Taking risks are immensely worth the effort," for only then do we find Christ as the Magi did and only then do we rediscover our true selves."

"Lift up your eyes and look around!" says Isaiah. Lift up your eyes and see the light that is come. The brightness of Christ, as powerful as the morning dawn, is all around us! Do we not remember what the Gospel writer John said, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it?" Christ is the life that is light! Christ lives among us! Grace and truth for our lives comes through Christ Jesus, today and every day.

Lift up your eyes, people of God! Lift up your eyes from the incessant news telling us to be fearful of a world that is dark and dangerous. Lift up your eyes from the same old same old, the status quo of our routines and the way we have always done things. Lift up your eyes and imagine what could be by God's grace, for all things are possible with God! Lift up your heads and look around for the glory of the Lord has risen upon you, risen upon YOU and YOU and ME.

Arise, shine! At the tender age of 5, Jahkil's great-aunt took him along to hand out chili and soup to people struggling with homelessness who were camped out on the street. That day sparked something deep within 5-year old Jahkil and his radiance ever since that day has helped others. His goal for 2017, at the tender age of ten, was to pack 5000 blessing bags, which consist of toiletries, socks and food, for those struggling with homelessness. On December 28th, he met his goal and his mom drove him and his bundle of blessing bags to Pacific Garden Mission homeless shelter on South Canal Street. This radiant young boy also serves as a youth ambassador for Heartland Alliance, an international organization that works to alleviate poverty, and he sits on the youth council for WE, a nonprofit that encourages young people to serve their communities through volunteer work. Radiance is essential for Jahkil.

Arise, shine! Bobby Baxter had always wanted to go on a mission trip, but she didn't until she was 80 years old. Bobby decided to join the Second Half Ministries team at her church and go on a short-term mission trip to Nicaragua. Since then she has invested her time and energy in the lives of those she has met. The church she attends serves the Nicaraguan community she visited through an elementary school that it built. Over 400 people as part of church teams have been involved in construction projects,

feeding programs, vacation bible school and economic development, with the goal of helping the community become self-sustainable. Radiance is essential for her church.

Arise, shine! Rodney Smith Jr., told ABC News, "I tell people all the time, if they are able, they can make a difference, and my way of making a difference is with a lawnmower." Rodney got this idea, because as he was driving home from college one day and he saw an elderly man cutting grass and it looked like he was struggling, so he stopped and asked if the man wanted some help. The man's reaction affected Smith so deeply that he was inspired to continue his work throughout the summer of 2015. In 2016, he recruited some local youth to help and a non-profit was born, which cuts lawns for free for elderly and disabled people, as well as veterans, and single moms, in Huntsville, Alabama. Rodney currently has 60 youth participating in the Huntsville chapter, with another six chapters across the state. His goal is to have a chapter in all 50 states. The youth he recruits are from 7 to 17 years old, and his goal is to teach young people the importance of giving back to their communities. Rodney radiates Christ's light!

Arise, shine! Peninsula Covenant Church started their PLUS Ministry to engage mature adults in making a hands-on difference in their community. The ministry simply began by asking those involved in the ministry to pray for their city and those who needed to hear the message of God's love. The focus was not inward but outward. The focus wasn't on what they could no longer do, but what they could. Peninsula's PLUS ministry radiates Christ's love, for it is the go to organization for the whole church, because their focus comes directly from Jesus' words, "I came not to be served, but to serve."

Arise, shine! In a church that has a strong mission emphasis, Chuck and Marilyn caught the vision. When Chuck retired from engineering and Marilyn from school administration, they heard God's call to go to Kum Ming, China, as missionaries. When they arrived, they experienced the government's monitoring of their movements and strict prohibitions to worship, yet they stayed the course, trusting in God's presence and guidance. They were a radiant presence in the City of Kum Ming. Extended family reasons brought them back to the US, fifteen years after they arrived in China, yet their radiant presence and commitment to Christ created in that time frame a Christian radio broadcast, and trained medical workers, evangelists and pastors who now serve in the region.

Arise, shine! What I love about the God whom we worship and serve, is that God chose to tear open the heavens and come down. God chose the least likely candidate to give birth to God's self, a betrothed young girl from a backwater town. God went to the fields rather than the palace to announce the good news of great joy with a chorus of angels. God chose the way of humility rather than royalty, being born in a stable and laid in a manger. God so often does what we don't expect and that should embolden all of us, for maybe, just maybe God could use us!

Yet, God expects the manifestation of God's radiance to be at work within us. Radiance is essential, if we are to call ourselves followers of Christ. As our Foundations of Presbyterian Polity states: "The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life."

This 2018, will we entrust ourselves to God alone? Will we focus on God's priorities, as given to us by Jesus, "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing and teaching them? Having received Christ's grace upon grace, will we radiate light in places of darkness or move into the neighborhood of need in our communities and radiate Christ's light?

I don't know specifically where God is calling you to radiate light, but I do know it is essential for you as a follower of Christ. You are either radiating Christ's light with your life or you are allowing the darkness of our world to prevail.

I don't know about each of you specifically, but I do know about us. Together, as this church, radiance is essential for us. And if we don't arise and shine, if we don't radiate Christ's light beyond these walls and into our community then we have no purpose of being. If a church focuses only on itself, then it has lost its purpose. I know this is a sobering way to conclude my message, but we need to be shaken from any complacency that has taken root within us as we start afresh this New Year.

Jesus didn't say to the disciples, "Stay in your holy huddle and enjoy each other's company." Jesus said, "Go!" Listen to the action words in the great commission, "Go, make, baptize, and teach." Where are we going as a church? Are we making disciples? Who are we baptizing? What are we teaching? Are we teaching each other to arise, to shine, to radiate Christ's light and go in the community where darkness may abound?

Arise, your light is come! The Spirit's call obey; show forth the glory of your God, which shines on you today. Fling wide the prison door; proclaim the captives' liberty, good tidings to the poor. All you in sorrow born, bind up the broken-hearted ones and comfort those who mourn. Rise up like eagles on the wing; God's power will make you strong."

Arise, God's people, show forth the glory of our God, for our radiance is essential! As this year unfolds, I wonder what stories will we write as a church. I wonder what stories each of lives will write! Arise, shine for our light is come! Amen!