

The First Reading is from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12:

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They 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.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then 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." ⁹ When 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Second Reading is from the Prophet 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.

We are six days into the New Year and I wonder how you are doing on your New Year's resolutions. That is, if you made any! Now I am not in the habit of making New Year's resolutions, as it seems to me more important to listen to one's life year-round. That is why, I see a spiritual director regularly, so that I can listen to my life. My spiritual director helps me discern how God is at work within my life and ministry, and she helps me discern how God might be calling me to make new resolutions throughout the year, not just as the calendar turns from one year to the next.

As a professor once said to me, "You can see God's handprints most clearly in your life when you take time to reflect on your life." Maybe that is why I find journaling such a helpful spiritual practice. It causes me to pause, to reflect, to listen to my life as Frederick Buechner encourages us to do saying, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace." When I pause to reflect on my life, I see God more clearly at work in it.

The magi clearly saw God at work in their lives, for they noticed a unique star at its rising and responded by setting off on a long journey to Jerusalem. They went to Herod's palace, who responded to their question about a child by gathering the chief priests and scribes. They told Herod, "The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea." Herod sent the magi off 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." Yet, the magi were attentive to the Spirit of God at work in their lives, for they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

Imagine if the magi had not been attentive to the Spirit of God speaking into their lives. There would have been no journey or gifts given to the child born in Bethlehem. The pageantry of three kings we celebrate each year would have been erased from our beloved Christmas story. Yet, we heard that the magi were attentive to God, are we?

Now when we heard the words from the prophet Isaiah proclaimed today, we probably imagined the babe born in Jerusalem that the magi came to pay homage to, "Arise, shine, for your light has come... Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Yes, Jesus the light of the world has come. When we hear Isaiah's words we see visions of the magi who came bearing gifts of gold and frankincense. It is probably hard for us to read this text without hearing the Christmas story. Yet, to be true to the text we need to hear it before the Advent of Christ.

We need to ask ourselves, "What did the people of God hear from these texts prior to Christ's birth? What is the light that has come?" A Jewish Study Bible points out that our passage comes from a lengthy poem, which encompasses chapters 60 through 62 of Isaiah. The poem heralds the dawn of a new age when the Holy City of Jerusalem and the Temple will be restored in all of its glory. The "your" of "Your light has come" refers not to a coming Messiah, according to Jewish scholars, but to the Holy City itself. The nations are to be drawn to the Holy City of Jerusalem because God's glory is present in and through the inhabitants, the people of God, of the Holy City.

This text is what is called theological imagination. The prophet imagines a time that is not yet fully realized. The prophet imagines what will be when God's ways are fully manifested among his people. The prophet urges his hearers to not give into despair, but to partner with God in manifesting God's ways for all of humanity. The prophet is saying to God's people, partner with God, be light among the darkness, draw all nations to God.

I believe as Christ's church in this age we are called to do this same work. We are called to be a light in the midst of the thick darkness of our world where warring factions cause millions to flee their countries and homes, where an innocent seven year old in her family car is gunned down, where children go to bed hungry night after night, where precious children and adults are trafficked for a greedy profit, where a family night of bowling turns into chaos and death, where catastrophic diseases claim loved ones, where powerful ocean waves wreak havoc and take countless lives, where a horrific traffic accident takes the lives of children anticipating a trip to Disneyworld, where a frigid night might mean death for those without shelter. Yes, there was darkness over the earth and thick darkness over the people of God in Isaiah's time, but also in our time. Darkness is real and tangible, yet as the people of God we are to keep imagining the light, the light God's gathered people can bring into the darkness. We are to keep imagining what God envisions for all of humanity and creation. We are to draw others to the brightness of the dawn that we have found in Christ.

This imagining reminds me of an older version of our denominational Book of Order, which stated, "The church is to be the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity!" The way we do life, the way we love and forgive each other, the way we worship and administrate our life together, the way we deepen our faith and steward creation, the way we are church together should demonstrate what God intends for all humanity. This, my friends, is a huge responsibility!

We are to be like the original "your" in Isaiah. We are to be like the light of the holy city. Here is how our form of government explains who we are to be as the church: The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27-28): **The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life. The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation. The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord."**

Yet, we, just like any church, are far from this ideal. We don't think we have the gifts we need. We give into despair at times. We struggle to see the new creation we could be. We harbor resentments, rather than forgive each other. We fail to love each other as Christ loved us. We point to ourselves, rather than beyond ourselves. We boast about our accomplishments and abilities, rather than giving God all the glory. Yes, we, just like any other church, are a work in progress.

So, what are we to do? We are to use our imaginations to see what is not yet true among us. I believe we can do this by being steeped in the Word. Being in the word brings to light what God intends for this church and for God's world.

We need to be fully immersed in the Living Word, beholding Christ's glow, Christ's brightness, Christ's light, until we ourselves shine. The quick movement of the liturgical calendar from Christ's birth to Christ's baptism next week reminds us that we can't just stay at the stable in Bethlehem. We have to be willing to grow up and walk with Jesus through the Gospels.

Yet, do we know the good news so that we can proclaim it? Do we live the Gospel drawing others to the brightness of Christ's dawn? Do we claim and proclaim Christ with boldness and confidence? Are we drawing others by the Spirit of God at work in us? Does this church reflect the wisdom of God in all its diversity?

These are sobering questions as we begin this New Year. Yet, I believe it is reflection - listening to our corporate life - that will enable us to see where we have been, so that we can see what needs adjusting or change to usher in more fully what God envisions for us. But, how are we to do this?

Remember my first question I asked this morning? How are you are doing on your New Year's resolutions, well what if our New Year's resolution as a church was "Arise, shine"? How might we more effectively draw others to the God we worship?

Well, we all know a yearlong resolution is often futile and prone to failure. That's why Miho Kubagawa's article about her new year resolution intrigued me. Back in 2013, she wrote an article about starting a resolution of the month club. Each month you could make a new resolution. But, instead of keeping things private, she involved others, inviting friends to join her in keeping each other accountable. So, each month the group of friends emailed each other their resolution for the month. The information was then tracked in a community document. This helped with accountability, through encouragement and celebrating successes. As the year progressed amazing things started to happen. The group grew as they talked with their friends and colleagues about their monthly resolutions.

Miho wrote, "I am inspired by and amazed at all of our resolutions. We have become each other's biggest cheerleaders, particularly when our resolutions have evolved from 'no alcohol' to 'create a website and send the link to the group when it's done'. Our tracker shows a progression of us getting bolder and more creative with our resolutions over time. Not only have we delved into the standard resolutions (exercising more, eating healthily or getting our finances together), we have also managed to write a business plan, learn new dance choreography, or start guitar lessons, just to name a few. We are more vulnerable and courageous, and we are taking more risks with each other's support."

What if you made a monthly resolution with a friend and then held each other accountable, by encouraging each other and celebrating your successes? What if we made monthly resolutions as a church and held each other accountable, by encouraging each other and celebrating our successes? Would we become bolder and more confident in reflecting Christ's light into the darkness of the world? Would we become a more vulnerable and courageous community, allowing us to take more risks with each other's support?

From the words of Isaiah may we hear afresh that we are the "your," God's gathered people of light, as well as the Light of lights that we have in Jesus Christ our Savior. Yearlong or monthly resolutions or not, we are called to arise and shine. Together, we are to be a light into the darkness that draws others to the amazing God who we worship. Let's be more intentional this year, arise, shine, people of God! Amen!

Link to Story:

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/new-years-resolution-20_b_4532726.html