

Radiance and Rejoicing
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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.

Matthew 2:1-12

- ¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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 wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.

When our son, Jim, was in high school, he had a teacher who imbued in him a deep interest in meteorology, specifically in clouds. Having filled some of my elective credits in college with a course in Severe and Unusual Weather, I was glad to support this interest. (Did you know there is an official Cloud Appreciation Society? Me neither.) Through him, I learned about lenticular and asperatus and pileus clouds. And because of what I was learning, I began to look up more. The sky stopped serving as background to my days and, instead, became an active character in the shape of each day. I became aware of how expansive it is. How changing. How active. I think this is why Isaiah’s imperative - “Lift up your eyes and look around” - resonates so much with me. There is so much I wasn’t noticing, wasn’t seeing.

The people to whom Isaiah was speaking were released exiles who came home not to a place which was flowing with milk and honey but to a place where there was much toil needed and many challenges yet to face. Being returned didn’t equate to a new life in the promised land. They were still poor, still under threat of rising empires, still occupying a contested land. And they were bowed down by these worries and difficulties and to-do lists. Not so different in some ways from the reasons I forgot to notice the sky. Trudging through the day-to-day, who has time to pause and gaze up? Unless you’re an astronomer, astrophysicist, or meteorologist, looking at the sky seems like a poor use of time.

With astrophysics and meteorology being modern sciences, the right description of our magi is astronomers. They looked to the sky for predictive reasons - in their case, to try to read the meaning of the changes in the sky, perceiving portents and determining divine interactions. Our magi, whose numbers we don’t quite know (we only know that they

brought three different gifts), these magi saw a change and, by their calculations, interpreted the change to mean a king had been born to the Jewish people. Whether or not they understood how significant the birth of a ruler would be to these people who, even centuries after Isaiah spoke, were still poor, still under threat of rising empires, still occupying a contested land, is unknown but they perceived a great significance of some sort and so they set out to recognize it.

They neared and, after some interactions with a neurotic and manipulative and power-abusing Herod, arrived where the star they had been watching stopped. In the presence of the child, they, too became radiant, vividly bright and shining,¹ as they filled with hope; their hearts thrilled and rejoiced, they were overwhelmed with joy. So, in thanks for the wonder to which they were directed, they emptied their treasures in offering to thank and support this tangible hope in the form of a child. The day called Epiphany, marked by the giving of gifts, is still the day when many exchange gifts rather than on Christmas Day, in recognition of the gifts the magi gave. As Dean R. Alan Culpepper explains, “The feast of Epiphany started in the Eastern church in honor of the baptism of Jesus,”² the other important day we recognize this day. On Epiphany we see with the eyes of the magi what a gift God-with-us is and through his baptism, we hear God’s affirmation of the quality of gift; in the third chapter of Matthew, we read, “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.””³

When we stop to look up from our busy lives, when we lift up our eyes and look around, and really notice the gift that Jesus is in this world, we begin to realize that his coming isn’t a singular gift but takes form as so many. Through Christ we have been given hope, a model for loving one another, an example of gentleness, a map of mercy, and so much more. Out of this understanding, churches have, some for decades, been gifting, in

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/radiant>

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 213.

³ Matthew 3:16-17.

recognition of Epiphany, what have come to be known as star words. A “star word” is a symbol of a gift received from God, just as the magi recognized Jesus to be. Each star cut-out has a word upon it, a word which represents a God-given-gift, and anyone who wishes takes a star on Epiphany. “Takes” not “selects,” because there is with the stars a trust that God will reveal the meaning of whatever word you take over the year to come. The star word is meant to guide you toward what it is God has to show you through that word.

Should you be inclined to think, “Well, that’s silly - just because I picked a word, that doesn’t mean God had something to do with selecting it for me,” there could be a measure of truth in that. But just as much, there is just as likely truth that, no matter what word you might take, if you lift up your eyes and look around, God can show you something through that word. As you might have surmised, I have prepared star words for us today. In no way do you need to feel that you have to take one but, if the idea appeals to you, or if you are even slightly intrigued as to what God might have to say to you through a piece of yellow cardstock, then you are welcome to take, not select, a star from the basket I will be holding outside the doors of the sanctuary after worship. Whether you pick up a star or not, God absolutely has joy to reveal and rejoicing to inspire in the days and months and years to come. But we’ll need to lift up our eyes and look around. So may it be for you and for me over the year to come.

Let us pray: God, raise up our chins and lift up our eyes to see the gifts you have given and continue to give so generously, we pray. Amen.