**Isaiah 60:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)**

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4Lift 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. 5Then 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. 6A 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. 7All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. 8Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

9For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

2In 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.’” 7Then 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.”

9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“They Come and They Go”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

January 5, 2025

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The first time I preached from this text, months into my first call in ministry. There was a retired UCC pastor in the congregation whose wife chaired the search committee. I remember this moment very clearly because of the enduring lesson he shared. I had written a story, a fiction, about people leaving their homes all over the U.S., finding their way to one spot in the Southwest. I frankly don’t remember much else about the little story I imagined apart from the fact that they had felt somehow pulled, and by God. After worship, Bob asked me whether the story were true and, never criticizing my attempt at fiction, mused as to whether there were no true stories to share. I remembered that this week when I read the text from Isaiah again, and also from Matthew, and thought about the places I have been because of a sense of call, and the people I have met who have felt called by God to a place or a purpose.

With the number of tragedies we have learned about this week, the number of inexplicable choices for violence, I can’t help but wonder whether you struggle with a deeper sense of the dark than of the light this extended Christmas season. Do you wonder sometimes whether we humans have all gone collectively mad? I pose that question even while I *rest confidently in my faith in God who loves us and who leads us with a greater light. We DO know this light, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.* Still, our faith and our trust are sometimes two very different things, aren’t they? Sometimes these feel different in their relative distinctiveness; one being somehow innate, somehow natural, and the other something we have to foster.

To have that in mind, I want to share two images with you that I hope will help you in your own consideration. In one of three science classes I took in college, Horticultural Biology, I learned about phototropism. Yearning for the light necessary to produce chlorophyll, plants physically turn to the light as the day passes. I’m sure you know that turning your potted plants will help to achieve this in your home. It is as natural to them as it is for a herd of cows all to face in one direction. Sometimes for warmth, sometimes to protect against other predators, and sometimes simply to keep them from hostility toward each other, cows instinctively point northward or sunward. These are innate urges, both plant and animal, and in these darkest days of winter, we probably understand them very well, when we might be able to ignore them in the brighter days of summer. We are made to turn toward the light.

And the Magi, wise astrologers from the East, know to track their movement by the stars in the sky, no one brighter than that which they believed would lead them to a new King. They believed, and so they traveled. They believed, and so they paid homage. And they also *dis*trusted the human king, Herod, as they were led not to obey him. Their greater faith was not in that man.

Can we have both faith and trust in God? I would say a resounding yes, even when, in looking at the senseless violence in the world, I am frightened by what we are capable of and worry about what may come to pass. Even in the midst of this, we know humanity’s greater impulses toward providing succor, toward building bridges and homes like the late Jimmy Carter, and to rallying in support of those who mourn and those who work for peace. We also turn toward the light, together.

When I wrote to imagine people called from various places to a single place and purpose, I somehow had forgotten the most powerful and true example of such a moment. I had not only heard about it; I experienced it, and it continues to take place. We have sung in worship here the chants and songs of Taizé, a monastic community in eastern France which was begun by Brother Roger in 1940 when he and his sister Genevieve provided sanctuary to Christians and Jews at risk from Nazi persecution. His work also attempted to bridge the rift between Catholic and Protestant Christians in a monastic community and eventual worldwide movement to promote ecumenism—Christianity across denominational boundaries. This sounds like light in the darkness, doesn’t it? It felt like it when we prayed in various languages and sang in spontaneous harmony; my heart was opened and lightened when I studied and worked with people in my group from 8 countries on 4 continents. And yet, the violent way of the world persists, and Brother Roger was stabbed to death during worship in 2005 by a mentally ill woman. Rather than understanding this to mean a breach of God’s support, the community has continued to work for peace and unity. Against the cold and the dark of our sometimes-base behavior, Taizé works to encourage more foundational yearnings. So do we here when we gather for worship and particularly when we celebrate the sacrament of Communion. Listen to the words of institution as we remember Christ’s saving act for us: do this in remembrance of me. Of him, who lived in faith, trusting that God will continue to draw us to the light and understanding that as one Body, we provide necessary warmth and light to one another. Jesus died in faith, trusting that God will not ask for continuing sacrifice. In this Christmas season, with the season of Epiphany opening before us, may we turn to the light and act in such a way that our greatest trust is not in any human ruler, but in God who provides our Light.

I would have ended this morning’s brief message here, but was moved to share the end of a reflection I read just this morning by a favorite preacher, Diana Butler Bass, because her own pondering this week, in this time in our lives, also moves us to *be* the light in ways you may not have considered before now.

She writes the following: “Christmas does not come easily. Peace on Earth terrifies and threatens those who have prospered under the old order. Corrupt kings will lie and murder — do anything — to stop the possibility of God’s dream made manifest in the world. Herod was one more such tyrant in the brutal history of tyrants. When it comes to human governments, there will be good rulers and there will be mediocre ones. But there will be oppressors and despots aplenty — even after the Prince of Peace is born. Another Herod always awaits, standing at the ready, evil intentions primed to execution.

What do we do when Herod is on the throne?

Be like the magi, those ancient wise men.

Do not obey in advance. Discern deceit; trust the truth.

Be brave. Following a star means moving at night. Sometimes the night will be very dark indeed.

Keep on the journey; trust the way. The star will stop. We can kneel, worship, choose joy. Even when Herod enacts his evil schemes, God is with us. Love is here, born into the world. Offer your gifts. Travel light. Give thanks. Pay attention to your dreams. And, whatever you do, take another road home.” Amen.