

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
January 4, 2009 – Epiphany Sunday

Isaiah 60:1-6

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On com-

ing to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Has anyone here ever been caught in a total black-out situation? You know the kind – no lights anywhere, not able to see your hand in front of your face, hesitant to move because you are not certain what may be in your path. The total blackout I am thinking of is a darkness so complete that it not only shuts down your visual system, it even seems to muffle sounds.

If you have been in that kind of situation, you know how much relief you experience when someone finally is able to turn on a light. The light does not have to be very big or even very bright to be effective in dispelling the effects of the darkness.

As I think about darkness and light, I am reminded of the scriptures for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, which contain many references to darkness and light. For example, in the prophetic writings of Isaiah, we noted the description of a people who have walked in darkness and who now will see a great light, and, in John's gospel, we read the proclamation that the true light, which cannot be defeated by the darkness, has come into the world.

That kind of imagery is used in the Biblical literature because of its power. There is a clear distinction between the darkness and the light. That is what the people of faith in Israel believed would happen when God acted in the world. That is what the church specifically believed took place in the birth of Jesus the Christ.

That brings us to the scripture passages for today. In Isaiah, we read a piece that was targeted to the Jews who returned from a long and painful exile. This passage was either written as a prophetic word hundreds of years before the conflict and the exile and the return happened, or it was written as a contemporary piece to give a message to the returning exiles, like a newspaper edi-

torial after an election. Either way, the message is the same. Either way, the words convey something of the divine hope of the people.

When the people were in exile in Babylon, they mourned because they had been forcibly removed from their homeland. The Psalmist spoke of this deep sadness in pondering the question of how a people could sing a new song in an alien land. For years the Jews wanted nothing more than to leave Babylon and to return home to Jerusalem.

No matter how much I have changed or the land has changed, they thought, just get me home. Then they arrived and their hopes and dreams crashed on the reality of what they found. Instead of the remembered glory of the dwelling place of God on earth, the returning people found crumbling buildings, inefficient and corrupt leaders, and an overwhelming apathy about God among those who had been left in the land.

In the midst of this anguish on the part of the people wondering what to do next came the word of the prophet. Isaiah told them to, “Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Somehow, the prophet said, as you exhibit spiritual faithfulness, you will enjoy the divine light of God’s presence again.

Not only would God’s light shine in this dark place, but the light would be so bright it would attract the attention of the nations of the world, who would look at Judah and envy the returning exiles. Their children who had been scattered as refugees from violence among many nations would return home. They would not be the only ones making pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Gentiles and unbelievers from foreign lands would come streaming there and would come bringing gifts of unimaginable riches for the nation of Israel and for Israel’s God.

The faithful ones in Judah would not have to think about going into the world and proclaiming the glories of their God. The light of God would shine so brightly that they would not have to be missionaries to the unbelievers because the unbelievers would see and follow the light and come to them.

The prophecy of Isaiah indicates how the divine light, in its power and its purity, would draw in all people so that the truth of God would be revealed to all. In the reading from Matthew's gospel for this Epiphany Sunday, we have the first example of how this would happen in the story of the Magi from the East.

We actually know very little about the Magi. There is no clear indication of their country of origin, for instance. We do not really know how they came to understand that something of significance was happening in Judah. The Biblical text is silent even on how many of them made the pilgrimage and how long it took them. Oh, there are intimations in the text about some of this from which we have drawn some guesses. Through the years, faithful Christians have elaborated and embellished the story so that now we even have names to identify the Magi. Yet, the text itself is strangely silent about all of that.

One thing we do know, however, is that the Magi were not kings. They were not persons of power and prestige from some exotic capital city in a foreign land. In fact, they were little more than disreputable fortune tellers. As one person has commented, the Magi would have been the equivalent of the writers of the daily horoscopes in the newspapers or the crystal ball gazers and palm readers setting up shop at the local swap meet.

Not only that, but the Magi, and the people who frequented them, were condemned by the good and faithful Jews. Shortly before the birth of Jesus, for example, one Rabbi had written, "He who learns from a Magi is worthy of death."

In telling the story of the Magi coming to the Christ child, Matthew's gospel, it seems, is trying to make a point to the early church. Remember that piece of writing in Isaiah, he seems to say, that passage that talks about how unbelieving pagans would come to the light of God? Remember how God said that all people would be attracted to and touched by my grace? Remember how God said that my truth would be revealed to all? Well, here is the perfect example. These slick and unsavory Magi came to the birth site of Jesus in order

to worship. Just as later in the gospel narrative other undesirables, like adulterers from Samaria, prostitutes in Jerusalem, tax collectors along the roadside, Roman soldiers and outcast lepers, would hear the message of God's grace and be attracted to the light.

Dear people of God, the question we must ask ourselves is this, "How much of the message of this Epiphany Sunday are we willing to embody in this congregation?" How open is the door of our congregation to people who may not be like us and who we may not want to have near us? How open are our hearts to people who may make us uncomfortable, but who see the light of God's grace and want desperately to come near it?

As we know that the light of God has arisen in our hearts and in the life of this congregation, may we be willing to allow that light to be revealed to all and to be received by all. AMEN.