Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Happy New Year! I was thinking that when the world was more – can I say normal? I’d still be enjoying the end of the 12 days of Christmas. Yes – Christmas really does last until Epiphany. This year Epiphany comes on Wednesday but I thought we could venture there today. Epiphany – the time in our church year when we celebrate Jesus Christ made manifest for us, but an epiphany is also a seeing clearly or something new made clear to us. As I read the verses from Matthew again, it brought to mind the many Christmas pageants I’ve known over the years. As a child, I didn’t see any incongruity in the stories – wisemen and shepherds were all part, but now recognizing these are quite different stories makes me wonder what messages each story might tell. Are there any epiphanies here for us?

Perhaps Luke’s story is most familiar; at least it is longer with more details. Luke’s focus is more on ordinary folks – Mary and Joseph are not royalty but folks just like you and me even though they have an extraordinary mission. And when the baby is born, the angels summon shepherds – folks considered pretty marginal in their day. They are the first messengers about this birth. And the baby is born – some say in a barn, others a cave but certainly not in great comfort. I love a point Amy-Jill Levine made when she points out ‘he was laid in a manger’. She notes the one who is to become bread for the world is placed in a Manger – the root word means to eat. And Luke includes women’s stories throughout his Gospel. Mary and Elizabeth are both recognized by name and their roles in these events are made clear but there are more even to the crucifixion and witnesses to the resurrection. Luke breaks the old mold of telling stories only through the eyes of men. And his stories are filled with the recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit.

How different Matthew’s story is. Joseph features far more prominently than Mary. Even the baby is mentioned less than Herod. It is a story with mysterious magi from the East and numerous dreams that guide the choices of key figures. Led by the light of a star these astrologers seek guidance from Herod who is king of the area. But their query sets off alarms for Herod. Even a baby born to be king – how far into the future would that be a threat – but Herod is afraid and determined to secure his future. Though we haven’t come to that part of the story yet, we hear echoes of Pharaoh killing all the babies. A warning in a dream has Joseph taking his young family to Egypt to escape Herod’s threat and the magi don’t return to Herod but travel home by another way. Matthew’s story is tied to the Old Testament story, often including scriptural announcements such as that of Micah as to where the Messiah would be born. Though we may miss the connections, people first reading Matthew’s story would have immediately recognized the point – Jesus is the new Moses to lead the people out of bondage.

Two very different stories about Jesus’ birth – perhaps we should call them parables – because it’s not as if one is true and the other not. They both serve to give us a picture of who Jesus is for us.

Though Isaiah is written to People in exile, this announcement of the light to come seems an appropriate announcement for the birth of the messiah. *Arise, shine, for your light is come.* It is certainly what people have been awaiting. I wonder if it is these words that inspired Howard Thurman to write his wonderful poem about the work that belongs to us now that this amazing birth has take place. The poem has been put into a hymn by Jim Strathdee:

I am the light of the world! You people come and follow me!

If you follow and love, you’ll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be.

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the sages and shepherds have found their way home,

The work of Christmas is begun:

To find the lost and lonely one,

To heal the broken soul with love,

To feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,

To feel the earth below, the sky above!

To free the prisoner from all chains,

To make the powerful care,

To rebuild the nations with strength of good will,

To see all God’s children everywhere!

To bring hope to every task you do,

To dance at a baby’s new birth,

To make music in an old person’s heart,

And sing to the colors of the earth.

Epiphany is a wonderful time to remember that the light shines within each of us – the light of Love. For the grace of God was not limited to the birth in a manger or the coming of the magi. The love of God continues to be born in our world even in these dark times – we just need to have eyes to see for God still loves the world. And yes, the work of Christmas continues to be with us – caring and rebuilding and bringing hope to every task we do. May God guide and inspire us as we enter this new year.