New Year Epiphanies
Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12
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Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 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. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 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. 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. 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.

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Sermon

One of the traditions of Epiphany is the Three Kings Cake. I was unfamiliar with the Three Kings Cake until one of my children's teachers asked for a volunteer to bake one for the class. Not knowing what I was getting into (which is the way I usually roll), I volunteered. How hard could it be? I assumed this would involve getting a cake mix and a can of icing from Food Lion.

When I received the recipe and read more about the cake and the traditions surrounding it, I knew I was in trouble. First, this was more like making bread (from scratch) than baking a cake from a mix. Second, there is a tradition of baking into the bread a small plastic Baby Jesus. If you get the piece of cake with Baby Jesus, you win a prize.

If memory serves, I was up most of the night trying to make this so-called cake and finally decided that including a little plastic Baby Jesus in the cake was a choking hazard. I really didn't want to be remembered as the Pastor Mom who caused someone to choke on Jesus. I had my own "epiphany" during this experience: In the future, only volunteer to bring something to school that I could buy ready-made at the grocery store.

On this Sunday, when we are celebrating The Day of Epiphany (which is actually Tuesday, rather than today), we are considering how God reveals Godself – not in a cake, but in the course of daily life; not to a classroom, but to the world; not as a plastic Jesus, but as God in the flesh. We are considering how God revealed God's glory and presence in Jesus. It is true, that sometimes we and others still choke on Jesus and all that he asks of us. We still choke on the truth that the prize we receive isn't an easy life, but greater responsibility.

Our first scripture lesson for today is from Isaiah, chapter 60. The people to whom Isaiah spoke these words had been in exile in Babylon for decades. The Babylonian army had destroyed Jerusalem and their temple around 587 BC. Then they deported most of the citizens to Babylon. A tale as old as time. A tale unfolding today in real time as we speak.

After about 70 years, the Israelites were allowed to return home. Excited and hopeful but also spiritually exhausted from what they endured in Babylon, they returned home to a disaster zone. Their time in Babylon had been dark; Isaiah challenged them to "Arise and shine for their light had come and the glory of the Lord would arise upon them, and his glory would appear over them." However, when they got home to Jerusalem it was in shambles. It would have to be rebuilt. What happened to the prize they expected upon returning home? What was their prize for enduring hardship during their exile? More struggle? More hardship?

Isaiah prophesies that they will not be alone in their struggle to rebuild their lives, just like they had not been alone during exile. God's glory, God's light, God's presence was being revealed to them in a powerful way. God's light would pierce the "thick darkness."

Isaiah also says that other nations will help them rebuild. They will bring building materials and costly gifts for the new temple, including exotic wood, gold, and frankincense. Others who are not Israelites will be drawn to the light of God which was rising upon them . . . others will be drawn to the glory of God appearing over them. God was revealing Godself to ALL people, not just some. Isaiah also challenges the people, amid the darkness of their destroyed city, to "Arise, to shine" so that others will be drawn to God**." "The light of God's blessing shining on the exiles' homecoming not only greets them but illumines their mission – they are to rebuild, replant, and renew their faith."** (Connections, Year A, Volume 1, Richard F. Ward, p. 152)

We fast forward to the birth of Jesus centuries after Isaiah's prophecy. In the Gospel According to John, we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, **and the life was the <u>light</u> of <u>all people</u>. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:1-3)**

The Three Kings / The Three Wisemen were guided by a light – a star in the sky – to Jesus, who was and is the Light of the World. Just like the Israelites who returned home to thick darkness, Jesus entered the world of thick darkness. His appearance and his light attracted people outside the Israelite community – the kings or wisemen being a prime example.

John goes on to say: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

John makes it clear that for some, the discovery of Jesus proved to be a choking hazard. The hardest truth for the people to swallow was and is that Jesus came as light of ALL people, not just some. His love for the world – all of the world, its nations and people – was not a pleasant epiphany for some. It still isn't today.

Jesus' teachings were also radical and hard to swallow, and they still are today. Our Bible study on the Sermon on the Mount (Jesus' teachings found in Matthew 5-7) has reminded us of the hard-to-swallow calling of Jesus to love our neighbors (all of them), to turn the other cheek, to work for peace, and so much more. Moreover, the prize for following the radical teachings of Jesus is hardship. No wonder we resist his light. It's too bright. It reveals too much about us. It reveals too much about our darkness.

Yet, to us Jesus says: "You ARE the light of the world." As if echoing Isaiah, "We are told to Arise and Shine even when the thick darkness feels so overwhelming. We are reminded that Jesus is shining his light, glory, and presence upon us in the darkness and through the darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it and the darkness will never overcome it."

We are reminded by the Apostle Paul in Philippians: "Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world."

Today, as celebrate The Epiphany of the Lord, and as we embark on the new year of 2026, we are called to seek Jesus even with the knowledge that he has already found us. We are called to seek him not for a prize but to worship him. We are called to daily invite the light of Christ to shine upon us so that we may be the light of the world for others. And, perhaps most challenging of all, we are called to consume the teachings of Jesus, even though they are hard to swallow.

Let us look be awake to the epiphanies of Jesus for each of us and our church in this New Year. Let us shine like stars in the world, drawing others to Jesus.