

“Arise and Shine”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 7, 2024 - Epiphany Sunday

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Happy New Season after Epiphany, everyone! I hope that, for you, the 12 days of the just-finished Christmas season were filled with Heaven’s gifts of joy, love, hope, and peace. I also hope that you received at least another gift or two from fellow earth-dwellers. Perhaps, over the last couple of weeks, you exchanged with family members, co-workers, friends, or fellow church-goers delightful gifts, such as common given batches of tasty treats, lovingly hand-crafted items, or gift cards. But perhaps you gave or received something a little different this year. Maybe over the 12 days of Christmas you gave or received something a bit less-conventional, like 12 drummers drumming, 11 pipers piping, 10 lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a-milking, seven swans a-swimming, six geese a-laying, five gold rings, four calling birds, three French hens, two turtledoves, and/or a partridge in a pear tree. If you did give or receive these from a truly loved one, you know that this motley, unconventional collection of gifts is substantially more difficult than a gift card to give or receive.

But while they would be quite odd and cumbersome, they would also be very valuable. According to PNC Bank, which since 1984 annually calculates the value of the items gifted in the classic carol, the current value of the collection of items received on the 12th day of Christmas is \$46,729.86. If you were to add up all of the gifts, 364 in total, as they are repeatedly given over the course of this most annoying Christmas song of all time, what PNC Bank calls “The True Cost of Christmas in Song,” they would be valued at a whopping \$201,972.66! What an expensive and whacky gift! May you never receive it (or give it)!

Today, we celebrate the Epiphany, which comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning “shining forth,” and throughout this season between Christmastide and Lent, we focus on how God gave a glorious gift to the world in shining forth in Jesus, even from the time of his earliest moments. We begin the season with a reading from the gospel of Matthew about shining young Jesus as he and his family are visited by magi, who came from somewhere in the east, following a shining star as it appeared and led them to Judea, where they would find a

newborn king and offer him precious gifts of shining gold, frankincense, and myrrh, gifts that might be pretty odd for most people to give or receive, but that were gifts of great value -- perhaps being more valuable than even the "True Cost of Christmas in Song" -- that would have been perfectly suitable in the day to give to a foreign sovereign in tribute.

Throughout most of the history of the people of Judah and Israel, they were not the ones receiving foreign emissaries offering such gifts as tribute, but were the ones sending out to neighboring empires' rulers delegations carrying precious gifts to offer and -- hopefully -- to appease them. Sometimes this worked, until it didn't, and the mighty empires around them attacked and conquered them and laid waste to their cities and land.

Our first reading this morning from Isaiah is a message given to people who had just returned to their land and its ruined cities after they had been overrun and destroyed generations before by the mighty empire of Babylon. After the mighty empire of Persia had conquered the Babylonians, they allowed the children of Israel, decedents of those who had been taken away into Babylon as captives, to return and rebuild, so that they might prosper again in their own land (so that they could then collect the riches of the land to send back to Persia as tribute).

But as those who returned to Jerusalem came with hopeful visions, what they saw upon arriving was a soul-crushing scene of devastation. The words of our reading were given to encourage those who returned to rebuild to be hopeful, to arise and shine, for God's glory had risen upon them and the riches of foreign lands, including gold and frankincense, would actually come in to them and not always be sent out by them.

Enter the magi. At the time of Roman occupation of Judea, when people had to travel to their ancestral homes so that they could be counted and then taxed by tribute-collecting Rome, the magi, foreigners who saw divine messages in the stars, followed a shining sign in the sky that told them that a new king was born in the land of Judea. So they brought their precious gifts to Jerusalem, where the Rome-installed king of the land lived. But there was no newborn child in Herod's household. And so he and his court were frightened, that born within his land might have been one who would challenge him or his heirs for the throne. Usually, Herod reacted when afraid by killing people, and so he sent the magi

onward to find the child and then report back to him so that he could then go and remove the threat.

So the magi continued on their journey, not far, just a few miles away, to Bethlehem, once the home of Israel's King David and from where would come, according to prophetic words from Micah and 2 Samuel, a messiah, or saving ruler. Still following God's shining star, the magi came to the place where young Jesus was and gave him their precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh -- gifts fit for a king.

Jesus would grow and shine among us, living into his destiny as one who would save people and rule over a realm where people would enjoy prosperity and peace. And he still shines and reigns over this realm on earth. He brings to all in this realm the riches of heaven: Peace, joy, love, and hope. Will we receive these gifts? And will we, in turn, offer what we have to Christ our sovereign? Will we see God's vision of what these gifts can do to transform and rebuild the world to be a place of blessing for all people?

This Epiphany season, let us give to the Shining One whatever gifts we have received, that through our own giving, we and the world around us may arise and shine. Amen.