

“The Light Shines”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
December 29, 2024 - First Sunday after Christmas

[1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52](#)

Here we are on this winter morning of a new year, celebrating the 12th Day of Christmas (did your true love give to you 12 drummers drumming this morning?), and as today is the day before the Feast of Epiphany, the day on which the Magi’s visit to young Jesus is commemorated, we are calling this Epiphany Sunday, and we will be celebrating the Wise Men, not only in our worship service, but afterwards, when we feast on king cakes, some of which have surprises hidden in them that if you are lucky enough to find will allow you to claim the title of Wise Person for the year (and yes, certificates will be given to our Wise People so that they can absolutely prove to any doubtful family members or friends of their new “official” standing for the year!).

We also recognize on this Epiphany Sunday that we’ve already moved through the darkest days of the year (at least where we live in the northern hemisphere), and each day is filled with just a little more light than the last one was. We lit our Advent candles, beginning with our first one on the first day of December, followed by two candles a week later, and then three, and then four, until on Christmas Eve, when we lit not only the four candles of Advent, but the Christ candle in the center of them all, and this candle is lit today on this culmination of these weeks of Advent and Christmas when we have paid attention to the growth of God’s light coming to us, no matter how dark and dreary it may seem outside or even in our hearts.

In our scripture lessons for today, we heard how God sent lights to shine in their own dark times, including the Magi, stargazers from somewhere east of the land of Judea, where Jesus was born, likely somewhere outside of the reach of Roman power, where they would have served as important figures that enlightened rulers with messages they received in the night sky. When God sent a star to rise at the birth of Christ, the Magi saw it and saw in it a sign that a king had been born in Judea. Trusting in this heaven-sent sign, the Magi traveled from their own land to Jerusalem, capital of Judea, where they might find the newborn king and worship him. But they found no newborn king in Jerusalem. Instead, they found

old Herod the Great, king of Judea and the regions around it, who was ever fearful that someone might rise to claim his throne and who killed all who seemed to threaten his reign, including three of his own sons, leading the emperor Caesar Augustus to say that it was better to be Herod's pig than his son.

And in Jerusalem, the Magi found not only a paranoid tyrant in Herod, but a fearful religious leadership, who did not greet the Magi's news that a new king had been born with joy, but rather with fear. The priests and scribes, who certainly were not friendly with Herod, but absolutely were in cahoots with him in wielding coercive power over the region's people, saw in the Magi's message that a new king had been born a threat to their own lofty roles, so they told Herod where, according to the Hebrew scriptures, a long-expected Messiah, one chosen by God to be ruler over the people, would be born. The Messiah, or Christ in Greek, was to be like David, who, long before, was chosen by God and anointed by God's prophet to be king of the people, and was to be born as a decedent of David in his hometown of Bethlehem, an otherwise insignificant little town just a few miles outside of Jerusalem. This Messiah was to be one who would establish a just and peaceful realm, where the worship of God would be genuine and true, and the religious and civic leaders would be servants of the people and not tyrants over them. So, fearful of any disruption to their own power, they told Herod where he could find a potential newborn Messiah, so that Herod could take care of their common problem Herod-style.

This is, of course, exactly what Herod sought to do, so he sent the Magi on to Bethlehem to gather some intel on where, specifically, the child was and then to report back to him, so that Herod himself could go and "pay him homage."

But even amidst the dark and dreary rule of Jerusalem's leadership, a light shined. Again, God sent the star to shine for the Magi until it rested over the house where Jesus the child was with his mother Mary. The Magi were at first overwhelmed with joy, and then they were moved to fall on their faces in worship and then to offer precious gifts that foreign dignitaries might give a newborn ruler of a neighboring realm. In their diligent, humble, and extravagant acts of worship, the Magi themselves, though they were outsiders to the people of Israel, shined as heaven-sent lights before they wisely returned home without reporting back to Herod.

This morning, we also heard in our first lesson from the gospel of John that in Jesus' adult years, God sent another light to shine brightly in his midst. The gospel tells us that Jesus' kinsman John the Baptizer was not The Light, but still shined as a witness to the good news that in Jesus, the saving Light for the world had come.

We, dear friends, are also to be like the shining Magi and John. We should be like the Magi in paying attention to messages sent from above, in responding to God's revealed light through faithful and diligent action, in offering own humble and extravagant worship, and in resisting human powers that seek to extinguish God's light. We should be like John in following Jesus the Light and in testifying through our own words and actions that in Jesus the grace and ways of God have been revealed.

We ourselves are called to shine as we follow Christ the Light and carry his way of light with us always. So today, on this bright Epiphany Sunday, and throughout the winter season, with its ever-brightening days, let us, with overwhelming joy, carry Christ's light and shine Christ's light that the world would be blessed. Amen.