ARISE, SHINE!

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

January 1, 2023

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

 Happy New Year, one and all! It is good to be here on this first day of yet another year in our lives as Christian people – followers of the Way, doing our best to follow the teaching and the example of Jesus the Christ. Today, we are celebrating Epiphany, which technically is this coming Friday, January 6, but we are celebrating today.

And we are using the lectionary texts for Epiphany – which are Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12. The Isaiah text is a poem about the restoration of the people of ancient Israel in Jerusalem after their exile in the 6th century BC; the Matthew text is the well-known story of the wise men. My focus in this little sermon today will be threefold: (1) the imperative of the poet, Isaiah, to “Arise and Shine;” (2) the way in which the wise men carry out that imperative in Matthew’s story; and (3) the way in which that imperative applies to us today in this place, Guilford Park Presbyterian Church. So…Arise…and Shine – which I take to mean: awaken to the real presence of Christ with and within us all (Arise); and be the love of Christ in all that you say and do and think (Shine). I believe this is the message – the good news – the imperative of Epiphany.

 Now, the word, “epiphany,” is likely quite familiar to you. An epiphany is some experience that causes you to suddenly “see the light” – to suddenly, and maybe intuitively, or imaginatively, understand something you had not understood before – to have a flash of insight – “Aha! Now I get it!”

 In the context of our church celebration, Epiphany refers to the day in which we commemorate the appearance of Jesus Christ to the world – and the understanding that this Jesus Christ is the kingdom of God in the flesh, come near in the world. “Aha, so that’s who this is!”

Traditionally, the church points to three New Testament stories as stories of epiphany, stories that reveal the light of Christ to the world. Those stories are: (1) the baptism of Jesus recorded in each gospel, in which a “voice from heaven” reveals who this Jesus is; (2) the story of the wedding in Cana, in the gospel of John, in which Jesus “reveals his glory” through the first sign of many of the real presence of Jesus in the world; and (3) today’s story from Matthew about the wise men, who see a light and seem to understand the source of true light.

 In the Old Testament we encounter passages of epiphany, as well. And our text for today from Isaiah is one of them, as the prophet Isaiah expresses his insight regarding the source of true light in that memorable imperative: “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.”

 Now, Isaiah is not speaking of the revelation of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the world – but he is speaking of the real presence of God in the world and with the people – and we Christians interpret his words as being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. That’s how it works for us with these words of Old Testament prophets. That is, the prophets are speaking within and about their own historical contexts, but we interpret their words – their concepts, as it were – as fulfilled in the later context of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. And their words continue to speak to us in our contemporary context. Context – concept – contemporary – “three C’s” of biblical interpretation that I have mentioned many times from this pulpit and in the classes I have taught.

Anyway, Isaiah is speaking to the ancient people of Israel, trying to get them to wake up and be mindful of the light of God’s real presence with them, even in the great “darkness” in their lives – the darkness that is their exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. In this poem, Isaiah is promising restoration, the restoration of Jerusalem, the coming home again, the shining of God’s light upon the people, and the revelation to the world that this light represents the real presence of God in the world.

 Well, this is the light of real presence to which the wise men awaken in our story from Matthew. These “wise men from the East,” as Matthew calls them, are “magi,” in the Greek – probably referring to secular people of the time who dabble in astrology and psychic dreaming. They are probably not “three kings” about whom we sing, with names given to them by the 6th century church. They are simply wise men from the East. And they represent for us the recognition of the world, outside the religious establishment of the time, that Jesus is the “kingdom of God come near.”

 So, they “arise,” so to speak, and inquire about this child born “king of the Jews” – which sets King Herod’s blood a-boilin.’ Herod cannot stand for someone else to be “king.” The wise men, of course, find this child and bring their famous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – gifts, by the way, that Matthew brings to this story from our Isaiah text for today.

 So, this Matthew story is a story of “epiphany” – an epiphany that this child Jesus is an appearance of God in the world – and the wise men seem to experience that epiphany, as they go to this child Jesus and are “overwhelmed with joy,” as the text says. They seem to have a flash of insight that the Kingdom of God has, indeed, come near in this child Jesus, who is a manifestation of God – the Word become flesh – Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

Well, God is surely with us on this day of Epiphany. The imperative of Isaiah to “Arise and Shine” – continued through the wise men – is the imperative that applies to us in this place, Guilford Park Presbyterian Church. Our imperative as followers of Jesus Christ is to wake up yet again to the real presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit – that is with and within us all. Such waking up is our “epiphany.” And such waking up empowers our lives as followers of Christ. Shining the light of the love of God in everything we do, say, and think in this world is our response to our waking up.

 As Jesus says to us later in the gospel of Matthew: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

 Well, in a few moments we will act out the message – the imperative – of Epiphany, as we celebrate once again, the Lord’s Supper. We will wake up and “arise.” We will come to what is a powerful symbol of the real presence of Jesus Christ with us. We will eat the bread and drink the juice, thereby inviting that presence into our very beings. And the light of the Holy Spirit within will shine and cause us to shine - strengthening us to bring the presence and peace and love of Jesus Christ into this world in which we live. Such is the power of this holy sacrament we call the Lord’s Supper.

So: “Arise, Shine!” Awaken to the real presence of Christ with and within us all. And be the love of Christ in all that you say and do and think. For this is the message – this is the good news – this is the imperative – of Epiphany.

 Let us pray: God of light, inspire us this day to awaken to your real presence and then go into the world as your love – your love that is the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.