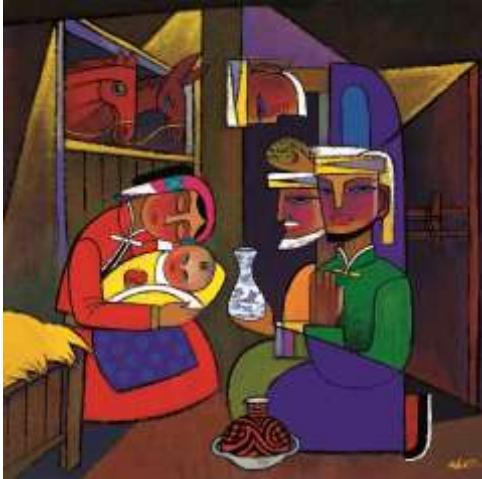


A SERMON by Rev. Marcella Auld Glass: January 4, 2026



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 in 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.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with 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 light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

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 of 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.

TODAY WE ARE CELEBRATING EPIPHANY. This is an ancient Christian celebration, dating at least as far back as the 300's. Epiphany is one of my favorite days in the year of church life. And it is the day we celebrate the arrival of the magi, or the wise men, who came to visit Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. January 6 is the actual feast day of Epiphany, which is also, if you count it up, the 12th Day of Christmas.

This word comes to us almost directly from the Greek.

“Epi”, meaning ‘on’ or ‘upon’, and “pahneros”, which means ‘visible’, or ‘seen’.

Epiphany means to “show up, show on, show out.”

So, an epiphany is more than just a “lightbulb” moment, or an “aha!” moment. An epiphany is something that is revealed to you. Something where light shines and makes something clear and manifest.

Most often on Epiphany we hear the story of the Magi, who travel from distant lands to follow the star and see Jesus. Joann preached last week from Matthew's gospel, and the fallout that comes after the magi's visit, when petty and insecure kings encounter God's love in the form of a baby.

We don't know much about the magi. The Greek text just calls them “magi”, which referred to a caste of astrologers in Zoroastrianism, a religion in Persia. The word “magi” is where we get the word “magic”. The biblical text doesn't give us their names and we don't know how many of them there were, but we 3 kings has a nice rhythm to it, and that allows each of them to have their own gift for the baby, with the gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The magi received the epiphany for all of us. They saw God made flesh and saw salvation for all people. On this day, as we celebrate epiphany, we give thanks for people who were willing to go to great lengths to follow a star in search of God.

I'm a fan of the poems of WH Auden and in his poem For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio, the characters of the magi speak about their journey.

“At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star.”

To discover how to be human now. Doesn't that seem like a good reason to worship God together this day, at the start of a new year?

AS WORSHIP BEGAN, I MENTIONED THAT ON EPIPHANY, WE OFTEN HEAR THE STORY OF THE MAGI. You may have noticed as scripture was read that there were no magi referenced anywhere in either Isaiah or John's readings.

I like to keep you on your toes.

No, actually, the Narrative Lectionary, from which we take our scripture passages, takes the time between Christmas and Easter to read through a different gospel, and this year we get John.

John's Gospel is one of my favorite books of the Bible which surprises people who know me well.

I can be a little direct, and I've got stuff to do and like it when people get to the point. And John is the opposite of that. John does eventually get to a point, but it takes a minute. I like his exalted and poetic language in writing, but I think I wouldn't have patience if I had coffee with John and he talked like he writes. He's a little woo woo for me. Jesus rarely answers questions directly in any of the gospels, but in John's his answers are even less clear. In this gospel, Jesus tells his disciples he is the bread of life. He tells them he is the Way, the Truth, the Life. He'll tell them that if they want to understand his signs, they need to be born again.

We have 2,000 years of church teaching so those phrases make sense to us, maybe. But imagine asking your rabbi, your pastor, a question and having them tell you "I am the gate for the sheep".

Of the 4 gospels we have in the Bible, John's has the most elevated Christology, which is a fancy way of saying that if there's a continuum between Jesus being human and Jesus being God, John is all the way over on the God side of the line.

We just heard the "birth story" as told by John, and unlike the one told by Luke that we heard on Christmas Eve, this one didn't start with him being born to a woman like human babies are born. John's gospel begins with "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God." In John's gospel, Jesus wasn't born. He did the birthing. He was there at the beginning of creation when God created the world.

Out of the gate, John lets us know his understanding of Jesus is different than the others.

It was also written around or after 100 CE, the latest of the 4 gospels we have in the Bible, written about 70 years after Jesus had died. It is not an eyewitness account. It is telling us the stories of Jesus that they have heard from other people. Even in the description of John the Baptist in the passage we just heard, we get a sense of that. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. "He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him." Notice next week when Jesus is baptized—we hear about the baptism but we don't see it. We aren't eyewitnesses to history in John's gospel. We are people who live in the light of God because other people told us the story of Jesus. And I think that is one of the reasons I love this gospel the most. Because my faith grew and developed because of how other people showed me who Jesus was. None of us were eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. So we have to be careful about who we trust to show him to us.

One thing I want you to know about the Book of John as you prepare to hear a lot of it the next few months, is that it is about signs. What other biblical writers may call 'miracles', John calls signs. They are to reveal something about Jesus. Always. That's why they happen. In the epilogue of the Gospel, it says, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

John's entire Gospel is an epiphany, a revelation about Jesus, shown through signs and testimony of other disciples.

The other thing I want you to pay attention to as we read through John is the cosmic nature of his story. He's writing to actual people in a community, so the politics are also local. But they are not only local. Jesus didn't come to save a person, or a small group of people. Jesus came to save the WORLD and restore it with heaven. The issues at stake in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are cosmic.

John 3:16 has weirdly become the scripture passage people like to hold up on signs at football games. *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'*

I'm not sure what it has to do with football, but it proves my point that John's gospel cares about the whole world. I think people should start putting John 3:17 on signs, just to see what happens. *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'* Or maybe John 11:35, which might better sum up how Jesus felt about the 49ers game yesterday, and the rest of the news, for that matter. *"Jesus wept."*

This means that our salvation, while personal, is never private. We can't ever think that we could be saved while people are suffering down the street or across the world. Salvation for John's gospel is complete and total for all of creation. We hear "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" and it feels singular. Much of American Christianity today believes it is deeply private and singular. We *believe*. You *don't believe*. *I'm going to heaven. You're not.*

For John, it is about the work we all have to do so that nobody will perish. Because not one thing came into being without Jesus the word. There is not a part of this world that does not matter deeply to the Word of God. What has come into being through him is life.

And for John and the authors of the New Testament, salvation wasn't about our souls escaping the earth for heaven. Salvation was about heaven coming to earth. The redemption of the world through Jesus is to unite earth and heaven, not to abandon earth for heaven.

So as we hear John's gospel in the coming weeks, let us look for the epiphany of the signs and the epiphany for the whole world.

We also heard a passage from the prophet Isaiah. And this passage is assigned on Epiphany largely for the last verse, I suspect. 'They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.'

When they read the story of the magi coming to visit the Holy Family, the people who knew their bibles would have recognized yet another connection of Jesus to the writings of Isaiah. And we finally understand why they brought such age-appropriate baby gifts. We can blame Isaiah.

And Isaiah speaks of the nations coming to the light of God. That word in Hebrew is also sometimes translated as 'people' or 'gentiles'. Isaiah talks about the nations a lot, and sometimes Isaiah is talking about an actual nation state, like Assyria or Egypt or Babylon. But most of the time he's talking about all the people, and not just the people of Israel. The message Isaiah receives from God is news that is for more than the people sitting in the pews in his church. It is for all the peoples in the world. What God is doing in the world is bigger than for just one group of people. It is for all the nations, all the people.

When we hear Nations will come to your light, we shouldn't confuse that with our understanding of conversion from one religion to another. Because there are countries where the majority of people follow religious traditions other than Christianity.

As Presbyterian flavored Christians, we believe that God has shown us who God is through the person of Jesus. We also believe that God is showing other people who God is through other teachers and traditions. Because God is bigger than any of us could ever comprehend.

You may have heard the ancient Buddhist parable about the elephant. *A group of people encounter an animal in the dark they'd never seen before. They sensed it was big so they spread out and reached their hands into the dark to encounter it. The first person, whose hand landed on a trunk, said, "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the animal is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The man who placed his hand upon its side said the animal, "is a wall". Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the animal is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear.*

As morning dawned, and the light of the sun shone on the scene, they saw the animal and encountered an elephant. Each of them was correct in their description of what they had felt in the dark, but in the light, they could see the whole animal and realized they had only understood in part.

When Isaiah says, "nations will stream to your light", he is reminding us that all of the ways we divide ourselves—while they may help us start to understand God—our divisions do not limit God's concern or care for the entirety of creation.

The word "nations" in this passage is particularly interesting this week, and a little troubling if you don't have the context for the meaning of the word, as the regime in the White House continues to talk about returning the US to being a Christian nation. First, the US was never a Christian nation. The founding fathers intentionally built provisions into the Constitution to keep this land free of the religious restrictions they faced in the countries they'd fled when they came here to start a new life.

Second, a nation could not convert and follow Jesus, even if it wanted to. Individual people in the nation can seek to know and follow Jesus but when people talk about a Christian nation, they are co-opting language of faith to bless the behavior of the government, justifying any bad behavior because God is on their side.

This weekend, as our president decided unilaterally, without an act of congress, to invade Venezuela and kidnap its terrible and corrupt president, he modeled the weaponization of Christianity into Christian nationalism. Listen to the language our government is using.

Jamar Tisby wrote, "In white Christian nationalism, power becomes sanctified. Using military force is reframed as a moral duty. Domination is recast as a divine right. We're seeing in real-time how theology is literally weaponized." For Trump, bombing another country and kidnapping its president is not piracy and crime. It is righteous intervention.

This nightmare we're seeing today is not what Isaiah meant when he said "nations will stream to your light".

I had a difficult time working on this sermon, which surprised me because Epiphany is my favorite of all church days. And part of it was, I'm sure, that it was the week after Christmas and I was filled with cheese and confusion about what day it was. But I think it was also because the epiphany we're getting right now about who we are as a nation, and how we've allowed cruelty and lawlessness to go unchecked and unchallenged, and how we're using religion to justify our sin, is not an epiphany I really wanted to consider.

And that's the thing about the light of God. It shines on the good and it shines on the bad. It illuminates those moments and interactions where we get it right. Where we love well, and live generously, and heal our wounds, and care for others. And the light of God illuminates those moments when we choose hate and exclusion, and when we grab power and hoard wealth, and when we cause harm to those for whom we could be offering care.

Often, I think we feel like we need to only be seen in the good light, that if God actually knew who we were, that God would walk away from us in a hurry. And so I want to offer you, and me, this epiphany this morning. The light of God never leaves you. It shines on you and you and you and me. And it always has and it always will. And the love God has for you has never been dependent on what was in the spotlight—good or bad.

If you think God will only love you once you're perfect or do all the right things, I invite you to remember that the God who created you in love, sees you in love now. When we see the light of God illuminating the things we'd rather keep hidden, or pretend are not happening in the world in our name, our response to that is to look, to really see the things we'd rather keep hidden, and then choose differently. Can we trust in the goodness of God enough to see ourselves, and our nation, with honesty?

The fact that God sees us, loves us, and shines the divine light on us does not mean that God loves our foolishness or cruelty. God wants better for us because God loves the world God created. You can't change what you don't, or won't, see or acknowledge. Being in the light of God gives us an opportunity to do better once we can see ourselves more honestly, and can acknowledge the harm caused by our behavior, and repair what we need to repair. We can only do that work in love.

May our epiphany in these days allow us to look upon ourselves and our nation with compassion enough to believe we can better reflect God's light to the world God loves so much that God came to earth to live among us, full of grace and truth.

Arise, shine, for your light has come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

