

Epiphany 2024 April Beckerleg

Isaiah 60.1-6

Ephesians 3.1-12

Matthew 2.1-12

Arise and shine for your light has come. That was the first line of our Isaiah reading and I just love that phrase. It sounds full of hope and encouragement, and that word we hear a lot these days, affirmation. And I like that. Affirmation. I think it chimes with how God longs to relate to us. God longs to say to each of us, arise and shine for your light has come. How might it feel to hear that being spoken to us? **Arise, shine for your light has come.** There is a sense of stepping into a space that feels right, of the right time and the right place for something to happen – both as individuals and perhaps also as a community.

Because today, Epiphany is all about the way that the Magi's time had come. Their particular expertise in reading the night sky, watching the stars, understanding the constellations how they related to the seasons and what it all meant – this was their moment, and here we are 2k years later talking about it. I imagine them full of hope and encouragement setting out on their journey.

Now. let me pause for a moment. Because I want to say a bit about these people at the centre of our story. We are very used to calling them wise men or kings – but I think this does them a great disservice –Magi is a much better term for them because that is what they were – Magical! These Magi were priests from Persia, and were associated with astronomy, alchemy, fortune telling, and of course magic – it is where we get our word for magic from. They would have been exotic and exciting and rather wonderful. **Arise and shine for your light has come.** To be a part of this would have really been something.

Because, the thing is – do we really think they would have managed that journey alone? I am sure they were leading experts in looking at stars, interpreting signs and portents – but did they know how to manage grumpy camels? did they know how to prepare and cook food? The best ways to find water in the desert? Haggle with inn keepers about the price of a bed for the night? Protect their belongings from bandits? The Bible says they opened their treasure chests. Treasure chests – big, heavy wooden boxes – I'm not thinking they heaved them all the way from Persia on their own. I think it is reasonable to assume they had quite an entourage. Others who have different skills and callings, people they collaborated with, relied upon, others who shared their vision, and were vital in making it happen.

So it seems to me that on that long journey there would have been many, many moments for lots of different people to arise and shine – from the ones managing the food supplies to the ones who knew just how to pack a camel's pack so it didn't rub, each playing their

part, each knowing they were part of something enticing and wonderful – and perhaps just a little mysterious.

It seems to me that perhaps our church family is a little bit like that as well. Because in many ways we do work individually, in our own lives with our own relationship with faith, each different from each other, each with our own part to play.

Lets spend a moment with that idea. Think about that call **'arise, shine your light has come'** How does it feel to hear that? What might your response be? (Pause) I imagine that all our responses would be quite varied, because yes, we may begin with a personal response, but it was never meant to remain that way – God's call to us only makes sense when we are part of a community – just like that journey from Persia to Bethlehem all those years ago, each of those individuals were part of something wonderful and mysterious.

Because that sense of mystery is also something we get from this story, and which Paul talks about in the letter we heard today. Mystery is important when we talk of matters of faith, this mystery Paul describes the 'mystery hidden with God'. This is the kind of mystery that the Magi found when they knocked on the door of Bethlehem and found a baby with his mother. This is the kind of mystery that draws us to the Communion table week after week. It is, as our Isaiah reading tells us, the kind of mystery which:

*... you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice*

This is what the Magi and their companions discovered in Bethlehem, when they saw and were radiant, when their hearts thrilled and rejoiced. This is the mystery, the glimpses of God's Kingdom, which we catch in those fleeting moments, when we know that we are part of something wonderful.

And the trick is to pay attention so that we notice those moments – and there are plenty of them – in our worship, in our fellowship, in our presence in the community. The beginning of a new year, 2024 is a good time for us to consider how each of us have a part to play in the work of God's kingdom.

The invitation might be for each one of us to consider that great journey from Persia to Bethlehem. The spectacle, the excitement and the sense of being a part of something wonderful. Where are you? At the front with the Magi? Helping sort the camels out? Checking the tents are in good repair? Keeping everyone cheerful and encouraged? Making sure no one gets left behind?

So yes, these are about on people's specific and individual gifts, but more crucially, it is a sense of how they are fitting into the whole - in to the community to which we belong, and the wider sense of what God is calling us to as a church.

And the thing is, this is already in action, we all see it around us every day in the life of the church that we are part of.

Arise, shine for your light has come. So, what might that tell you about where God might be calling you? Are there things which are on your heart that need to be thought about and prayed over? Perhaps it might begin by setting some time aside to Be with God to ask these questions. To wait and to listen, to notice, to support and to encourage, to continue to play our part so as a church we may continue to be:
Open to God, Open to Each other. Open to the Community.

Loving God, bless this chalk, that it may be helpful to your people; and grant that we who use it to write upon the door of our home may seek to open our homes and our hearts in hospitality and welcome, for all who dwell in or visit our home; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.