

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Feast of the Epiphany
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Home

Two people I love very dearly have come home from hospital recently, one just over two weeks ago, and one only last night. Both of them had profoundly difficult journeys, both of them sojourning through fearful days and nights. And I can tell you truly that as good as it is to come home after such a journey, what we come home to isn't the same. Because when we've come through a great ordeal, we are not the same. We don't often think about what the Magi actually undertook in their travels to Bethlehem, don't often consider the incredible danger they put themselves in. As the poem Jim just offered us – T S Eliot's Journey of the Magi - so perfectly describes, the wise ones made it to Bethlehem, and they made it back home, but the journey was grueling and what had seemed like home before they left, turned out not to be what they thought. They'd been changed. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

What makes a home? How do we know we are home? I'm not actually sure home is a place. Sometimes it seems more a sensibility. What does it mean to be home? While we might not realize it, the Epiphany story, the story of the Magi following a bright star in the night sky, is really a story about home. It's a story about leaving home, about finding home, about homing instincts. Three wise ones, kings we often call them, saw an amazing star in the night sky and were so compelled, they had to follow it. We call them kings because in the creches and the paintings they're almost always wearing crowns. We say they were kings who came to worship the newborn king, but they were much more likely men of a priestly class who were sorcerers, occult practitioners, astrologists and stargazers. Stunning stars and comets were thought to herald new kings in ancient times – they were signs of the Heavens crowning a new ruler. We know there were magnificent comets at the births of Augustus, Caesar and Nero, so it makes sense that these astrologists wanted to find the king this magnificent star belonged to.

So the Magi left their home, and likely traveled hundreds of difficult miles to Jerusalem. The star had captured their attention, of course. They'd set their sights and their minds and their course by it. That star was their homing device, drawing them to a new home. They'd made their way by that star, but it wasn't the star they were after, it was the newborn king. "We have observed HIS star at its rising," the wise ones said, "and have come to pay him homage." These Magi were not Jews searching for the long-awaited Messiah. They were foreigners, unbelievers, occultists who couldn't resist the pull of the great love that had been born in Bethlehem, the love that was heralded by a very bright star.

They came to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews, but when they arrived, they knew him to be their king too. That's important to pay attention to, because it speaks of the great

wonder of Epiphany. On Epiphany, the time we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus Christ as the light of the world, those wise ones knew that the light bright enough to light up the whole wide world was for them too. Yes, Jesus was king of the Jews, but Epiphany shows us, he came, and still comes, for everyone.

In the early church, Epiphany was one of the three great festivals. The other two were Easter and Pentecost. Can you imagine trading Christmas for Pentecost or Epiphany? Most people can't tell you when Epiphany or Pentecost happen, but they can sure tell you about Christmas. Epiphany is always on January 6th, and yes, that means we're celebrating it a day early, on the 12th day of Christmas. But it really is a feast not to be missed, so on this last day of Christmas, we'll hold both.

In the early church, incarnation, God in human form - wasn't so much focused on the Christmas Day birth of the baby in Bethlehem, as it was on the revelation of Jesus as God's Son who had come as the light to enlighten the whole wide world. On the Feast of the Epiphany, we're told the three wise men finally reached Bethlehem, found the Christ-child and recognized him as King. We celebrate the whole season of Epiphany as a season of revelation, the season that reveals the Christ light coming into the world, the time for us to "Arise and shine, because our light has come..."

Those words, spoken by the prophet Isaiah were for people who had just returned to Jerusalem from Babylon where they had been exiled for over 50 years. The city was in ruins, the people were in conflict and there was terrible tension around rebuilding the temple. The people were utterly demoralized, surrounded by darkness and gloom. The prophet Isaiah had for some time, been calling out their wicked ways, their many transgressions, their multitudinous sins. *Isaiah 59:12* And suddenly they heard "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" The prophet, no longer preaching gloom and despair, had finally proclaimed that their light had come, and God's glory was all around them. Finally!

If we've lived long enough, we know something of the darkness Isaiah's listeners knew – most of us have experienced our own doom and gloom. Many of us are emotionally exhausted from the political deceits, the reality of starving children, people living in tents right over there by the highway, the climate crisis that threatens our planet. And even though at some level we know we are the fortunate ones, still, we long for a better, brighter, lighter future. So the Feast of the Epiphany – the revelation of Jesus Christ as the true light of the world- has come just in time.

Arise, shine, for your light HAS come!

God promises redemption, and we get to help with that redeeming. This is just the time for us to rise and take up the living and loving that God has set before us. That's why the light has come you know. It's not just to make us feel better, though surely it does that. The light has come into the world to give us what we need so that we can rise and shine and do the loving and healing and redeeming work of our loving God. Yes, of course we can rest in the hope of light at

the end of the tunnel... we just need to remember that the light that dispels all darkness has already come, and it comes so we can reflect that light for the life of the world.

The Magi were not the only ones who longed for the light. Longing for the light is something planted deep within each one of us, no matter what tradition we grow up in or what tradition we do or don't choose as adults. This longing for the Light is our deepest place of connection, it is our homing device, and it belongs to all of us. On Epiphany we celebrate the Incarnate One who has come to be a light to enlighten all nations and all people, even those astrologers who came from so very far away. Whatever happened to them in Bethlehem changed them forever and when they decided to go home by another way, they took the light with them and brought it into every dark place they encountered. Jesus, the light of the world, came two thousand years ago in Bethlehem and he comes to us today just the same. And that is good news for people who could use a little light. Jesus comes, offering light and mercy and tenderness and blessing and love. We only need to open our hearts to receive them.

Where do you get glimpses of the light? They are there, everywhere really, if we see with the eyes of our hearts. We'll find them in the crocuses peeking up through the snow, in the tender words of a friend, in the face of a beloved child, in the clouds welcoming a rising sun with the most beautiful colors imaginable. There are glimpses of the light everywhere, we just need to remember to look. It will help to be gentle and tender and self-compassionate and kind. We work so hard, try so hard and yet this might just be a really good time to turn our faces toward the light and bask in the glory of the God who loves us, who forgives all our failings and wants us to do the same. Epiphany reminds us to remember the vulnerability of the baby laid in a manger and the grown man who hung on the cross, and to allow for our own tenderness and vulnerability too. Life isn't always easy – but Jesus never said our lives would be easy. He did, however, promise to be with us always, and not just with us, but in us. We are God's chosen dwelling place, and I think in some way, that means that just as God is our home, we are God's home too.

Home by another way. That is so much of the Epiphany story. We think we know where home is, think we know how to get there until we're stunned into the recognition that the place or the person or the job or the body we've always called home, isn't so reliable. We think we know our true north until he leaves, or she dies, or the great silence tells us we are in a house, not a home. Sometimes we need the big journey, the bright star, the thing we never could have asked for or even imagined, to get us to pay attention, to really look at what we think we can count on, what we think is our home. Home isn't a place. It's not a building or a nest. God is our home.

In Epiphany, we tell the story of three wise men who followed a star they couldn't take their eyes off of. It took them away from everything they had thought was home, to their true home in God. In Epiphany, we celebrate the light of Christ that glows bright enough for everyone, everywhere to see it and to follow. Epiphany, my dears, is the time for us to rise and shine and be the light that came among us when Jesus was born. Amen.