

Isaiah 60:1-6

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. **2** 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. **3** Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. **4** 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 on their nurses' arms. **5** 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. **6** 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.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: **6** "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." **7** Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." **9** When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I went to visit some of my family up in Fancy Gap on Friday. They were in a home accessed from the Blue Ridge parkway and I didn't plan to stay overnight because I knew we had the potential for snow and ice so I stayed late for the visit but headed home around 9 pm. What I hadn't anticipated was that they would close the parkway off in anticipation of the inclement weather. Now it is dark and I am forced onto a windy dirt road that is unfamiliar in order to try and navigate my way off of the mountain. It was a bit stressful but at the same time, I caught myself marveling at the darkness. Living here in town, I never experience true darkness. I can count 11 streetlights from my front porch. But I can tell you that the Blue Ridge Parkway on a cloudy night is the darkest darkness you can image. It almost felt like it was physically pushing against me. I caught myself yearning for light...any spark of it...it was where I gravitated. Light calls us that way...because darkness is not our natural order. That is why times of grief, or hardship, or injustice, or evil are so difficult....we feel the unnatural push against us and we yearn to escape it...we strain to see the edge of the darkness and find the flicker of light that holds the hope that things can be different...that night will give way to morning and we can have a fresh start and a new day.

I love these scriptures that we have read today. From history to prophecy to gospel there is a common thread – the light that is sent to save us from the darkness...the light that gives order to our chaos...the light that illuminates hope in the midst of despair. I also love science and the ways that it can speak to the truth of these scriptures. A few years ago, the Hubble telescope discovered Earendale. The name means “morning star” and it is farthest known star from Earth – 12.9 billion light years away. 12.9 BILLION years. It is incredible to think that as we stand in the darkness and look up at the stars, we are seeing light that has traveled for years. Even our closest star is over 4 light years away.

It stirs my imagination to wonder...when God spoke the stars into being...when God gave us those flickers of light in the night sky so that we would never be without the reminder of the power of light to overcome darkness...was that first star the same light...millions of years later...that finally reached the sky for the Magi to witness and to follow? I know, I’m not getting down and detailed with the math here, but my point is...with the light of the stars having such vast travel time, we are looking upon light that has been on tremendous journey already...and light that can guide us on the journey to come. We are looking upon light that was...and is...and is to come. Light that God spoke into being, that Isaiah promised would arrive, that the Magi witnessed and followed, that pulls at us to do the same. I think about how stars can die...burn out...cease to exist...yet their light, already in motion, continues to shine upon us for years...like a path of hope that never dies.

The star that the Magi saw prompted them to step out into the darkness with the intent of finding the morning...the light that would reveal to them the King, sent by the heavens. Have you ever thought about that? If they were guided by a star, it meant that traveled by night...they rested and re-energized in the day, but in the darkness, they went to work...they took one tentative step after another, maybe even for years, in order to see where the light led them.

Sometimes, we want to avoid darkness at all costs...but sometimes, it is only in darkness that we can see the light that shows us the path ahead...the journey that transforms...the truth that only when we endure the night can we say...then comes morning.

The past few years have been challenging. We have seen more darkness than we care to, and we have no idea what 2024 will hold...the world seems ready to boil over and fear could seize us, cripple us, leave us void of hope. But I don’t think we are meant to cover our heads and weep in the darkness...I think we are called to boldly step into it. To walk, head up, into the night and look at the promise of Christ that lights the way.

I think we are called to not fear darkness but to rejoice in its midst because we know “then there was morning.” We know the rest of the story. We know that this infant the Magi worship will grow to be the savior of the world...the one who walks in the darkness and becomes a great light...the one who endures suffering and death and yet rises in glory and resurrection life. We know that the light reveals, even if the fullness of that light may still be years from reaching us.

So, fear not, children of God...for the Lord has spoken, the light shines upon us, and guides us to new paths of righteousness...of hope, peace, joy, and love...may we embrace it with shocking boldness, justice seeking faith, joyful endurance, and transforming love.