**Weekend of Sunday, January 7, 2024**

**Epiphany of Our Lord/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6**

**Second Reading: Ephesians 3:1-12**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 2:1-12**

**Sermon Title: *"Epiphany: Arise, Shine, and Follow the Star"***

**Theme**

*The feast of Epiphany (“manifestation”) concludes the Christmas season with a celebration of God’s glory revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. In Isaiah and Ephesians, that glory is proclaimed for all nations and people. Like the light of the star that guided the magi to Jesus, the light of Christ reveals who we are: children of God who are claimed and washed in the waters of baptism. We are sent out to be beacons of the light of Christ, sharing the good news of God’s love to all people.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6**

1Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
  and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
 2For darkness shall cover the earth,  
  and thick darkness the peoples;  
 but the Lord will arise upon you,  
  and his glory will appear over you.  
 3Nations shall come to your light,  
  and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
  
 4Lift 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.  
 5Then 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.  
 6A 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.

**Second Reading: Ephesians 3:1-12**

1This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—2for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, 3and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.  
 7Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

**Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12**

1In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “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.” 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They 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.’ ”  
 7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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.” 9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

**Sermon**

This evening, January 6, is the principal feast day, the “Epiphany of Our Lord.” It is an occasion that the Mahoning County Lutheran Cluster has chosen to worship together. And since Zion already has a tradition of Saturday worship, I volunteered Zion to host.

I thought the principal feast, the Epiphany of Our Lord, was a moveable feast, meaning that it could be moved to the following Sunday. So tomorrow at Zion, we celebrate the Epiphany of Our Lord too. However, I was wrong about that. Principal feast days cannot be moved, to which I say, “Whoops! My bad, but we’re going to do it anyway.”

The length of the Season of Epiphany is determined by the date of Ash Wednesday which is determined by the cycle of the moon and can be anywhere from four to seven weeks long. This year, the Season of Epiphany is a short five weeks. During those five weeks, we are drawn to the radiant themes of light, revelation, and the manifestation of God's glory especially as Jesus Christ our Lord is revealed as the second person of the divine Trinity, the Son.

The Readings appointed for the feast day guide our thoughts and together, they weave a tapestry of the Epiphany of Our Lord – a revelation, inviting us to arise, shine, and embrace the light that has come to us in the Christ child, and not to just the Christ child, but to who he becomes for us as our teacher, spiritual leader, example of the godly life, and ultimately, our Savior.

The Prophet Isaiah paints a vivid picture of a people in darkness receiving the glorious light of God. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isaiah 60:1). The call to arise is a summons to shake off the gloom and lethargy, and to stand up in the radiant presence of God. This message was originally prophesied to a broken and beat-down-occupied Israel.

Isaiah envisions nations and kings coming to the brightness of Israel's rising, bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. The imagery here extends beyond the historical context, reaching forward to the Epiphany of God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. The call is not just for Israel but for all nations to be illuminated by the glory of God.

Historically, Israel has failed to fulfill their part of the deal. They were to be a light to the nations drawing all others to themselves, emblematic of the godly people God chose them to be. Instead, they took the position that as God’s Chosen People, they had to do nothing or less.

The Gospel of Matthew takes us to the journey of the Magi, traditionally named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, wise men from the East, who see a star rising and follow it to find the newborn King of the Jews. This guiding star is a celestial sign, an epiphany in the heavens, leading the Magi to the Christ child.

Their journey is filled with anticipation, and as they arrive in Bethlehem, they find the child with Mary. I find their response … surprising. I suggest, “This peasant baby is the king we traveled so far to visit and worship?” However, their response is to worship and pay homage, presenting gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Epiphany in Matthew's Gospel is a revelation to the Magi, emblematic of all Gentiles, recognizing and honoring the divine presence in the humble setting of a stable. Yes, I know the scripture doesn’t say that the wise men actually visited the Bethlehem stable, but look at all our nativity sets and there they are, at the stable, so let’s just move on shall we.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul unfolds the mystery that was hidden for ages but is now revealed in Jesus Christ. The Gentiles, once excluded, are now fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise of Jesus Christ. This revelation of God's *inclusive* plan is integral to the essence of the celebration of the Epiphany, as the light of salvation extends beyond the borders of Israel to embrace *all* peoples.

Paul, a steward of this mystery, sees himself as a messenger to make known the unsearchable riches of Christ. The Epiphany, as revealed in Ephesians, is not only about the manifestation of the Savior to Israel but also the unveiling of God's redemptive plan for the entire world.

As we explore these passages, we find a beautiful tapestry of themes that woven together capture the essence of the Epiphany of Our Lord: the radiant light of God's glory, the inclusion of all peoples in God’s redemptive plan, and the worshipful response to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah's call to "Arise, shine" is a clarion call for us to step out of the shadows and into the light of God's glory. The imagery is powerful—the darkness may be pervasive, but the light of God's presence is far more radiant – even invasive! The Epiphany reminds us that the arrival of Jesus Christ dispels the darkness of sin and ignorance, inviting us to walk in the brilliance of His truth and grace.

Paul unveils the mystery of God's inclusive plan in Jesus Christ. The revelation is not confined to a specific group or ethnicity but extends to all people. The Epiphany in Ephesians challenges our preconceptions and calls us to embrace the radical inclusivity of God's love. The light of Christ shines upon all, breaking down the dividing walls and welcoming everyone into the family of God.

Play the video - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJ5kw6XUZIM

Maybe you’ve seen the public service announcements presented by the organization, *StandUpToJewishHate*. The PSA does indeed address hate against Jews, but appropriately and to their credit, their PSA also addresses hate against blacks, Muslims, Asians. Two thousand years later, we still struggle with Paul’s understanding of the inclusivity of the Epiphany.

The Magi's journey is a paradigm of faith-filled seeking. The guiding star symbolizes the light of divine revelation that draws people from afar to encounter the God’s Messiah. The Epiphany teaches us that the journey of faith involves following the leading of God, even if the path seems unconventional. The Magi's pursuit of the Christ child reflects our own quest for meaning and purpose in following the light of Jesus Christ.

The Magi, upon finding the child, respond with profound worship and homage. They present gifts fit for a king—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Epiphany of Our Lord calls us to emulate the Magi's response, offering our lives in worship to Jesus Christ who is revealed to us. The gifts signify not only the recognition of Jesus Christ’s kingship but also the sacrificial nature of our devotion to Him and His way of life.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

How do we respond to the Epiphany of Our Lord unveiled in Isaiah, Ephesians, and Matthew in our lives today? How do we arise, shine, and follow the guiding star of Jesus Christ's light? I’m so glad you asked.

The Epiphany beckons us to arise from the shadows of sin, doubt, and complacency and step into the radiant light of God's presence. As we embrace the truth of the Gospel, let us allow His light to illuminate our lives, dispelling the darkness within and around us. Arising and shining involve intentional steps toward spiritual growth, obedience, and a life lived in the brilliance of God's Word. We need to be children of the light!

The Epiphany in Ephesians challenges us to embrace God's inclusive love for all people. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to extend His love beyond our comfort zones and cultural boundaries. Let us actively seek opportunities to share the Gospel with those who may feel excluded, remembering that God's plan is inclusive, and His love knows no partiality. We need to be children of the light!

The Epiphany invites us to embark on a journey of faith, following the guiding star of God's revelation. Like the Magi, our journey may involve risks, uncertainties, and detours, but the promise is that the light of Jesus Christ will lead us to Him. Let us cultivate a faith that is active, seeking, and responsive to the leading of God's Spirit. We need to be children of the light!

The Magi's worshipful response serves as a model for us. The Epiphany calls us to offer our lives in devoted worship to Jesus Christ, who is revealed to us. Our worship involves presenting the gifts of our time, talents, and resources, recognizing Jesus Christ as the true King worthy of our highest adoration. May our lives be a continual offering of worship, reflecting the transformative power of the Epiphany in our hearts.

As we celebrate the Season of Epiphany, may the combined brilliance of Isaiah's call to arise and shine, Paul's revelation of God's inclusive plan, and Matthew's account of the Magi's journey inspire us to respond with faith, worship, and a renewed commitment to follow the guiding star of Christ's light. Arise, shine, and follow the star—the Epiphany of God's glory and grace awaits us.

**Prayer**

God of every nation, by the light of a wondrous star, you led wandering Magi to the humble infant Jesus Christ, revealing to them your plan of salvation for the whole world. In the miraculous and the mundane, in union with all who have glimpsed the light of your grace, lead us to Jesus Christ that we may offer our worship and serve Him with sincerity of heart. We pray this in His name. Amen