

Sermon – Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Epiphany – Year C
2 January 2022

“Light and Life to All Nations”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. While the world has largely moved on from Christmas, I’m choosing to linger a bit longer. After all, even though we’re celebrating Epiphany today, it’s only the ninth day of Christmas. Sure, my radio station of choice abandoned Christmas carols on the 28th, but I’m hanging on. No trees have been taken down in our house! Many of the gifts that were unwrapped on Christmas morning are still lying around the house, particularly the board games that were gifts for the whole family. Nine days ago, these gifts were still wrapped, waiting to be torn open by one or another child. We don’t put tags on Christmas gifts in our home. Instead, each family member is assigned a different wrapping paper. But the kids don’t know which paper is assigned to which person until it’s time to open them. To make matters more fun, there are seven different wrapping papers in play. One for each of the five of us, a sixth for grandparents and other relatives, and a seventh for gifts that are for the whole family. Once the wrapping paper correlation is revealed, it is this last group that grabs everyone’s attention. After all, what’s better than a gift for everyone?
2. Giving gifts at Christmas, of course, goes back to the first Epiphany. The wise men from the East follow the star to Bethlehem, wanting to pay homage to the child who has been born king of the Jews. They bring extravagant gifts to this child: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts, however, are not the

first gifts. They are given in response to the gift that is Jesus. These wise ones, perhaps, have the words of Isaiah in mind as they arise and follow the light of the star: Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your glory. The prophets had long foretold not simply a new king for the people of Israel, but a Savior and Messiah who would bring light and life to all people. The wise men bring gifts to Jesus, but it is Jesus who is the gift given for everyone, born of the chosen people to choose all people. It is he, Jesus, who is wrapped up in our human flesh, born into the chaos and commotion of everyday life. This child shall dispel the darkness. His light burns brighter than the star that heralds his birth. As Christmastide continues, as we mark Epiphany today, we come again to worship Jesus Christ: God wrapped up in humanity, the Light of the World.

3. The lingering shadows of night, however, do not go away willingly. While the wise men gladly seek out the new King, the old king plots to hang on to his petty throne. Herod fears for his future. He seeks security through violence and tries to entrap the Magi in his machinations. When Herod is thwarted by the Lord, who warns the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod, he orders the death of every child in and around Bethlehem under two years old. Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt, refugees uprooted from home because of a megalomaniacal monarch. But Jesus is Messiah, the One chosen and anointed by his Father, who is the true King. He is the One elected by God to reign over all peoples, all nations, all creation. Herod causes pain and suffering almost beyond imagining, but he cannot undo the will of God.
4. While one does not want to overstate the case or draw more parallels than actually exist, it's hard to not recall the events of this past Epiphany. Last year on January 6 we watched in disbelief as a mob mounted an insurrection in the heart of our democracy. Upset by the results of an election and egged on to violence by reckless demagogues, the mob sought to undo the fabric of our nation. Fortunately, they failed. For now. As this New Year dawns, the future

- and fate of our nation is uncertain. Will the coming year bring more division, breed more contempt, unleash more hatred? Such are often the cycles of human history, and the darkness seems unbreaking.
5. The good news is that regardless of who occupies the Oval or any other office, or what happens next in our nation, we are one of the many nations being drawn into the reign of Christ. Christ, the gift wrapped up for all people, is born into the pain and suffering stirred up by the Herods of every age. He endures injustice and oppression to overturn it. As you likely know, the gifts of the Magi are gifts with meaning. Gold, fit for a king. Frankincense, wafting heavenward, fit for God. And myrrh, an embalming oil, fit for the One who would one day die for us. Jesus has come to take the throne, but he does not claim it by force. No, this King's rule is not more of the same. It is a rule marked by love. It does not hold power for itself but empowers others through the Spirit. It is something that Herod, so twisted in upon himself, could never understand. It is something that the Herod inside each of us resists mightily. But to those who suffer under the weight of sin and death, those who live under the bootheel of tyranny, the reign of Christ is the balm of hope, the first light of the morning peeking above the horizon as the long night finally gives way. Just as the Bethlehem star pointed to and then gave way to the brighter light of Jesus, so too does the light of Epiphany point to and then give way to the dazzling dawn of Easter.
 6. As we enter this New Year, the days are still dark. The future is uncertain in so many ways. The pandemic's hold tightens again. Grief comes over us in waves. But dawn is breaking and we, like the wise ones before us, are invited to journey by new roads. We don't have to return to Herod or play his games of power. We, like Paul, have been imprisoned within the freedom of God, released from the grip of sin and sent now as humble servants of the gospel. We are called to bear the gift of Christ, wrapped up in flesh like each of us, as the gift given to all of us. As the church, we are the witness of God's mercy

and grace to our own and every nation, so that, as Paul writes, “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.” Paul goes on to proclaim that in Christ, “we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.” Friends, we have access to God through Christ who is born for us. The manifestation of Epiphany is a revelation that begins a revolution. God in Christ is overturning the ways of this world, its violence and tyranny, to bring all people to Christ, the gift given for all people. May we walk in his light throughout the coming year, whatever it brings. May we be present for others as signs of Christ’s presence. May we hold on to the light of Epiphany and look to the light of Christ, who is with us in the darkness and through whom the new day will finally dawn. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.