

**Prelude:****“Shine Jesus Shine”****[Annie Schulz]****Gathering thoughts:****[Beth Woelk]**

Happy New Year and welcome to worship with Grace Mennonite Church for Sunday January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the first Sunday in the year 2021! At the dawn of this New Year, we find ourselves once again in a province-wide lockdown, with the imperative to stay home in order to keep one another and ourselves safe. Those of us here creating this service recording imagine those of you reading, listening and worshipping from the comfort of your homes and hope that this service is blessing, a balm, an encouragement. Once again, we thank all those who make this possible today. Annie Schulz and Grace Singers, Ted Kopp our sound and recording technician, and Laur Steven who will bring us a reflection on scripture and introduce our new worship series for the season of Epiphany entitled “Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now.” Pastor Doug is taking some well-deserved vacation this week and we pray that it will be a refreshing and restoring time for him.

**Call to Worship:**

January’s days are short and nights are long.

The weather is cold, and the festive season is all but wrapped up.

Perhaps we’re all feeling like we could use a little good news, a little warmth, a little light!

Enter the season of Epiphany:

A liturgical time all about the manifestation of Divine Light;

Here, all around us like the dawn

Bursting suddenly through the clouds,

Illuminating everything with goodness, warmth and radiance.

So arise and shine, for your light has come!

The glory of God has risen upon us.

Lift up your eyes and look around!

The glory of God is all around us;

Our hearts thrill and rejoice.

We rejoice with the Magi,

Who have found the child they seek!

(Inspired by Kairos Canada Year B Epiphany Resource)

**Prayer:**

Join me now in this beautiful Epiphany Prayer written by Glen Mitchell.

O Star-flinging God,

whose light dances across eternity,

dazzle us into your presence  
this new year.

Open our hearts to the mystery of your love.

Awaken us to your presence,  
knit to the ordinary.

Reveal to us what is possible, but not yet present.  
Heal us, that we might be healers.

Reconcile us to you and to ourselves,  
that our living might be reconciling.

Stop us often, we pray  
with news that is good  
with hope that holds  
with truth that transforms with a Word  
tailored to this trail we're on.

May the word of your grace guide our steps  
like the sun by day  
and the north star by night,  
as we travel into the gift of a new year. Amen.

**Scripture:**

**Isaiah 60: 1-6**

**[Beth Woelk]**

**60** Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
<sup>4</sup> 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.  
<sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,<sup>[a]</sup>  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
<sup>6</sup> 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.

**Grace Singers:**            **“Arise, your light is come!”**

*Arise your light is come! The Spirit's call obey;  
show forth the glory of your God, which shines on you today.*

*Arise your light is come! Fling wide the prison door;  
proclaim the captive's liberty, good tidings to the poor.*

*Arise your light is come! All you in sorrow born,  
bind up the broken-hearted ones and comfort those who mourn.*

*Arise your light is come! The mountains burst in song!  
Rise up like eagles on the wing; God's pow'r will make us strong.*

**Prayers of the People:**

I invite you to join me in this time of prayer and to offer your own prayers – silent or spoken – in the quiet pauses that I will lead us into.

God who creates the heavenly lights,  
hear our prayers.

We give thanks for our Sun,  
which gives light to the Earth,  
and pulls the other planets in its orbit.

We thank you for your good Creation –  
for flounder and fireflies, alpacas and aardvarks,  
mammals and maple leaves –  
and we heed your call to protect it.

We thank you for Jesus Christ, your greatest gift,  
and we place our trust in him.

We also thank you for your other blessings –  
for song and silence, for wind and snow, for starlit nights.

At this time, in our hearts or aloud, we give you thanks,  
hear our silent or spoken prayers of thanksgiving.

God who shines light in unexpected places,  
hear our prayers.

We pray for justice in our world.

We pray for the grace to resist systems that give some  
an overabundance and leave others with less than enough.

We pray for those who have no clean water  
and those without sufficient food.

We pray for the swift and compassionate dissemination of Covid vaccinations.

Shine your justice upon the Earth, O God, and change our hearts.  
Hear our silent and spoken prayers for justice.

God whose light is nourishing and generative,  
hear our prayers.

We pray for all the social systems in which we share life.

We pray for our families and friends, neighborhoods, apartment complexes, long-term care homes, our church, the Good Shepherd fellowship, MCEC and ever widening circles of church, citizenship and global family.

Empower us with fresh and green visions of community.

Help us tend to each other gently. May we offer to our friends and to all whom we meet the nourishment that your love offers us.

In silence and in speech, we pray now for those we love and for our communities.

God who makes the starry host,

We pray for the unity of the whole human family.

We often think that our solitary actions are so small,  
that they have no effect on the world.

Remind us that our actions matter

and give us a vision for ways that we can reach out to others each day.

Hear our silent and spoken prayers for daily inspiration and loving acts that are just and sustainable.

God of fire and cloud,

God who offers us companionship and transformation,  
we pray also for ourselves.

We offer you our conviction and our confusion,  
our faith and our fear,  
our longings and our lives.

In our hearts and aloud, we pray at last for ourselves.

Hear our silent and spoken prayers for our own needs.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, Light of the World, who taught us these words to pray:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever.” AMEN

(Inspired by Kairos Canada Year B Epiphany Resource)



**Reflection:            Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now            [Laur Steven]**

Today we begin a new season of the church year, Epiphany, which follows immediately after the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the season of Christmas. Technically, the feast of the Epiphany is next Wednesday January the 6<sup>th</sup>, but Protestant churches following the common lectionary usually don't celebrate the feast day as such. We here at Grace, though, are beginning a new series of sermon reflections—which will carry us to Lent—based on the Epiphany theme “Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now!”

In the Christian tradition, Epiphany refers to the surprising, world-shifting *revelation* of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the light that shines in darkness. Our lectionary readings during this season refer to a number of epiphanies, such as the Magi following a brilliant star to the manger, Jesus' presentation in the temple to Anna and Simeon (as Jan spoke about last week), Jesus' baptism by John, and his transfiguration witnessed by the close disciples. But there are many other ones, both before and after Jesus' death on the cross. Think for instance of the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognizing that the stranger who explains the scriptures to them, breaks bread with them, and then disappears, was the resurrected Jesus. Or think of Saul the arch persecutor of the early Christians being miraculously transformed into Paul the apostle to the gentiles.

In each of these cases the revelation of God's truth shines a light into a dark place, illuminating the world in a new way, transforming what we see around us, and what we might be and do.

I'll begin by referring to observations made by Pastor Beth on Dec. 13<sup>th</sup>, the Joy Sunday of Advent. Beth points out the way Psalm 126 both recalls the rejoicing of God's people in the past when “the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,” and prays for future rejoicing when “those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” She comments: “Perhaps more than any other liturgical season, Advent possesses this sort of now-but-not-yet quality that the writer evokes in this psalm. During Advent we remember and celebrate the Christ who came to us even as we also cry out for the ways that we are still longing for his coming. This can be a difficult paradox or tension to hold.”

The season of Advent is the church's way of acknowledging the “difficult paradox or tension” of hovering between past and future that is a significant dimension of our lives as believers. And that tension is still present in Epiphany. Our reading from Isaiah today gives us a past/future shift similar to the one Beth showed us a few weeks ago:

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

60:1 Arise, shine; **for your light has come**, and the glory of the LORD has

**risen upon you.**

60:2 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**.

Yes, the tension and paradox are there, but in Epiphany our theme changes. For Advent it was “Prepare! Restoration is Coming.” But our theme for Epiphany is “Awake! Arise! God is calling Now!” The time shift in Isaiah is similar to the Psalmist, but not the same. The call to “Arise, shine” stresses that the light has come; it is here Now! Grammatically the tense is present perfect: the action of coming began in the past but continues to the present. And yes, the darkness will return in the future, but the “Lord will arise upon you,” in you, through you, to shine into that darkness.

My focus today is on how the season of Epiphany—the revelation of Christ as saviour—stresses the Spirit-filled Kairos time, the eternal now, which we always inhabit through the grace of God if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. The pivot-point of past and future is the present—Now! Our human, chronological understanding of time as linear past, present, and future does lead us to feel that God has *done* good things and *may again*, but that at present we must wait for God’s coming, his Advent. But Epiphany urges us to awaken, to break out of our chronological understanding, to recognize that God is always happening in our lives, *now*, and that we must arise as Spirit-filled bearers of light to the world.

Kairos was the ancient winged Greek God of opportunity, who suddenly appears but who as suddenly disappears if we do not seize the opportunity. Kairos is an important philosophical and rhetorical concept as well as a theological and spiritual one. The common feature of all understandings is that a Kairos moment presents us with an opportunity to make an ethical change. In philosophy (in which I include science) I discover the truth of a situation and shout “Eureka, I’ve found it!” In rhetoric (in which I include preaching), the Kairos is the moment I find the most appropriate form of words to persuade you of the rightness of my view. It is the opportune time, the right time, both for me as speaker, and for you as hearer. Teachers will know this as the “teachable moment.” In the spiritual understanding, though, the Kairos moment is Spirit-filled. The rightness or justice of the moment is revealed by the Spirit to me, and through me to you, and we have the opportunity to act on it or not.

Think of the Magi story. These foreigners arriving at the manger were astrologers, philosopher-scientists of their time, who studied the movements of the heavens, and interpreted those movements as portents, signs of significant events about to happen. So, when they arrived in Bethlehem and “saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy,” says Matthew. This is their Eureka moment! They’d found what they had predicted.

Or had they? Definitely something was revealed. But did it fit their expectations? As T. S. Eliot puts it in his poem “Journey of the Magi”:

There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different...

Matthew continues:

2:11 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.  
2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Magi must have felt flummoxed. Their joy at finding the place the star stopped would have been mixed with surprise and disorientation on seeing the child in those impoverished circumstances. Is this the king? Well, their evidence all points that way. They pay homage to the child and head home “by another road.” Yes, they are on a new journey now, and their homes will never be the same for them. In Eliot’s poem they wonder as they wander whether they will be “at ease [there], in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods.” The revelation they have experienced is a Spirit-filled Kairos. When they seized the opportunity presented by the star, it rocked their world.

The Greek word for the revelation of Epiphany is apocalypse. We usually think of the apocalypse as the end times, and we find apocalyptic imagery in the Bible disturbing, despite its associated promise of restoration—a new heaven and new earth. But when we shift the lens to the Kairos perspective we see that if God is calling us Now, then that light entering our darkness offers us the opportunity to follow a different road into the future. We have heard many times this year that the pandemic has pulled back the curtain on social inequities that are systemic, and that we must change. Think of the perennial overcrowding and dirty water problems on First Nations reserves; think of the endemic problems with for-profit long-term care homes; think of our plague of homelessness in the wake of substance abuse, fragile to non-existent mental health care, a paycheck to paycheck economy, and no affordable housing. And this is Canada, a haven of relative wealth and security in the west. Globally our world is a place of darkness for many, a darkness that God continually shines the light of epiphany into, showing us a new road to follow into the future.

On Dec 20, the Love Sunday of Advent, Pastor Doug’s reflection picked up the theme of revelation as opportunity: “This year’s emergence of powerful voices

urging everyone to remember that ‘Black Lives Matter’ has presented to those of us who are established and secure an opportunity to open up our minds and hearts to the true Christmas message all over again.” Yes! Opportunities are all around us, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I’ll close with an opportunity closer to home for Mennonites. Grace congregation is part of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, which is part of Mennonite Church Canada, which is part of the Mennonite World Conference. As of 2018 Mennonite Church Canada has 26,375 baptized members, and 197 congregations. The largest member of the Mennonite World Conference is the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia. It has 367,761 baptized members, and 1126 congregations! What?! We’ve had a vague awareness that there are now more Mennonites in the global south than in the west, but these numbers are staggering! We may feel a bit like the Magi—joyful that the Mennonite world is growing globally, but knocked off our pins when the implications for our changing world bear in upon us. Mennonites are in the midst of an epiphany: a revelation that in worldwide terms we in the west are now the minority in the denomination our forbears founded 500 years ago. And yet we still hold the lion share of financial resources of the global church.

Mennonite Church Canada is trying to do something about this. According to the MCC website, “Meserete Kristos Church and Mennonite Church Canada have formalized a sister-church relationship with a focus on mutual encouragement, prayer and support in areas of leadership development and church planting.” (<https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/ethiopia>) Protestant Christians in Ethiopia are under threat from a government which demands they build buildings or lose their land. At about 20% of religious believers, they are persecuted by the Orthodox 35% and Muslim 45%. The Meserete Kristos Church is strikingly like that new-fangled anabaptist wildfire that spread across Europe 500 years ago. MCC knows Meserete Kristos needs our help, now. After a 2017 trip to visit the rapidly expanding Meserete Kristos College, Darryl Jantzi was quoted in *Canadian Mennonite* as saying, “In an age that casts doubt on just about everything spiritual, it is heartening to see and experience the concrete indisputable power of God manifest in a solid, rapidly growing community of believers.” I would offer one change to Jantzi’s comment: the doubt about everything spiritual is happening here, in the west, not in the two-thirds world.

What can we at Grace do? Here’s an idea: We could, if we felt called that way, take \$10,000 from our \$65,000 reserve fund and send it to MCC, earmarked to pay for a year’s theological study for 4 students in Meserete Kristos College. Who knows, one of the graduates might end up as a missionary to the spiritually challenged west.

On the Joy Sunday of Advent Pastor Beth read Paul saying to the Thessalonians (and us): “Do not quench the Spirit.” On the Love Sunday of Advent Pastor Doug said: “Jesus came at Christmas to wake us up, to help us be reborn, to make us wonder, over and over, about what the purpose of life is meant to be.” In Epiphany, we are called into the light, now.

Amen

**Hymn of Response: “Awake! Awake and Greet the New Morn”**

*Awake! Awake and greet the new morn, for angels herald its dawning.  
Sing out your joy, for now he is born. Behold! the child of our longing.  
Come as a baby weak and poor, to bring all hearts together,  
he opens wide the heav’nly door and lives now inside us forever.*

*To us, to all in sorrow and fear, Emmanuel comes a singing;  
his humble song is quiet and near, yet fills the earth with its ringing:  
Music to heal the broken soul and hymns of loving kindness.  
The thunder of his anthems roll to shatter all hatred and blindness.*

*In darkest night his coming shall be, when all the world is despairing,  
as morning light so quiet and free, so warm and gentle and caring.  
Then shall the mute break froth in song, the lame shall leap in wonder,  
the weak be raised above the strong, and weapons be broken a sunder.*

*Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night, though dark the winter and cheerless.  
The rising sun shall crown you with light; be strong and loving and fearless.  
Love be our song and love our prayer, and love, the endless story.  
May God fill everyday we share, and bring us at last into glory.*

**Benediction:**

Go into your week rejoicing in the Light!  
Take heart; be strong and loving and fearless.  
May love be your song and your prayer.  
May love be the endless story.

Go into the New Year rejoicing in the Light!  
Like the Magi – offer your gifts to the world.  
And may the love of God,  
the fellowship of Christ,  
and the grace of the Holy Spirit be with you all.  
Now and forever. Amen.

**Sending Hymn: “Oh beautiful star of Bethlehem”**

*Oh, beautiful star of Bethlehem, shining a-far thro' shadows dim,  
giving a light for those who long have gone,  
and guiding the wise men on their way unto the place where Jesus lay,  
beautiful star of Bethlehem shine on.*

*Refrain:*

*Beautiful star of Bethlehem, shine upon us until the glory dawn;  
oh, give us the light to light the way into the land of perfect day;  
beautiful star of Bethlehem, shine on.*

*Oh, beautiful star, the hope of light, guiding the pilgrim thro' the night,  
Over the mountain till the break of dawn;  
and into the light of perfect day it will give out a lovely ray;  
beautiful star of Bethlehem shine on.*

*Oh, beautiful star, the hope of rest, for the redeemed the good and blest,  
yonder in glory when the crown is won;  
for Jesus is now the Star divine; brighter and brighter he will shine;  
beautiful star of Bethlehem shine on.*