

01.07.24 – Epiphany 1

“Secret Meetings”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 60:1-6 (NIV)

- ¹ “Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
- ² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
- ³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- ⁴ “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
- ⁵ Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
- ⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

Leader: These Words of Praise Are of and from God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 2:1-12 (NLT)

Visitors from the East

- ¹ Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ²“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”
- ³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”
- ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote:
- ⁶ ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”
- ⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem

and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

Leader: These Words of Worship Are of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Protector God, you sent your own Son to be our Savior, disruptor of the status quo, yet the hope and joy of the world, knowing the future sacrifice of divine love he and his family would make. For all this and what is to come, we thank you and worship you today in Scripture, prayer, music, and communion. May we sense Epiphany, facing the new year with enthusiasm and wonder. Let us recognize the miracle the Magi discovered. Speak to us this morning in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

Happy New Year, officially! I hope you’ve had a good week after all the food, visits, and celebrations. I found myself craving routine, yet also hoping for snow (that didn’t happen!). I hope you have made some time to think about this coming year for your personal lives as well as your church life. I find it helpful to articulate goals and plans, but to do so with great flexibility, so that God can direct my steps as well as my leadership. I spent intentional time with the church staff this week sharing a few of my United Baptist hopes and dreams for 2024.

What is Epiphany? According to the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, “Epiphany” is the biblical word for "manifestation" or "revelation". It refers to God's action of revealing his glory to the world by bringing salvation through Jesus Christ. So, Epiphany includes the shepherds recognizing the Messiah, the Magi acknowledging the King of

Glory, and the disciples perceiving Christ as the Son of God. Epiphany can occur for us any time we open our hearts and minds to realize that Christ is our salvation.

For today's passages, we focus on Third Isaiah, called Trito-Isaiah, chapters 56-66, based on the prophet Isaiah's lectures, poetry, and notes, and composed in his style by an anonymous writer in Jerusalem. Pastors use this chapter now to explain poetically what Epiphany is. Scholars agree and interpret that God's glory described is the epiphany that occurred when Moses and Israel witnessed Yahweh's magnificence in the burning bush on Mount Horeb and received the Ten Commandments. Although there were about 690 years between Moses and Isaiah, the prophecy anticipated Christ's birth and the world's understanding of him. According to Isaiah 60, a time when the scattered exiles have returned home, there is dismay at the devastation. Yet, Israel will shine its God-given light as a beacon to the nations, through a Messiah who reflects God's glory; this anointed one will remove existing darkness in the world. Other nations, specifically Gentiles, will be attracted to Zion (i.e., Jerusalem). People who believe will come from great distances, bringing wealth, like gold, silver, incense, rams, and flocks of birds. The animals will be used for offerings while the gems and minerals will be used to beautify the temple. The imagery of camels, ships heavy-laden with riches and wealth surely influenced Matthew's account of the three kings. These words of hope were important for the early church and for missions as they are for us today. This prophecy is timeless.

Our second passage, Matthew 2, is a different birth narrative than Luke's. Not surprisingly, the gospel writer moves directly from his birth

announcements to his infancy and the surrounding dangers of the unjust government and culture into which Jesus is born. Christ descends to earth to save the whole world, not just Israel, and the writer feels this birth fulfills Isaiah 60's prophecy. If you re-read the genealogy in chapter 1 of Matthew, it is clear, for Matthew, that Jesus is the true king of Israel. Is there any surprise that Herod the Great would be jealous and hostile to Jesus as the "King of the Jews"? The conflict arises out of a perceived power struggle; Herod meets with leaders to find out more about this child. Then he secretly meets with the three wise kings who are planning to search for the child; he tells them to be quiet about the child! He wants them to spy on the family for him, so that he can destroy any potential for leadership.

Why have secret meetings in any setting? Usually, it is to keep information away from public knowledge; remember the Watergate cover-up and the Nixon tapes? Or Oliver North's covert arms deals with Iran through Nicaragua? It all was done surreptitiously yet the truth came out into the light of day. Balancing transparency and privacy is a challenging task these days; that's why certain matters like legal contracts, land, health, finance, or personnel issues require a Board's Executive Session, but it is done in an agreed upon, Roberts Rules of Order type of democratic process. Discernment for leadership actions requires accountability, not dictatorship.

That of course wasn't the case with Herod. Life in Biblical Mediterranean society had little privacy. Doors were kept open for air and unlocked for a sense of communal living. Even today, Roudaina shared with me that your neighbors are or become your family, so meals and

many conversations are shared house to house, yard to yard, with people coming and going. So, for Herod to have secret meetings was counter-cultural and hinted at extreme paranoia or unethical deeds. If you look up the words secret or private meetings, the synonyms would be illicit or adulterous affairs, not a business type of arrangement. It was assumed sin was happening. In this case, Herod was fearful of losing his power and position, so put pressure on his friends to be spies.

According to digital (*Encyclopedia*) Britannica, the Magi, or astrologers, were three kings who visited Jesus, and are known as “Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar (or Casper). According to Western church tradition, Balthasar is represented as a king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India.” The more honorable three kings made a wise decision not to go back to Herod, but to continue on to their own countries; we know they shared the news of Jesus but did so with his protection in mind. Their epiphany (“they bowed down and worshipped him!”) revealed that Jesus was the Son of God! These men who were pagan and lived in the darkness of mysticism (or Gentile which means not belonging to Israel) were warned by God and decided to honor him by protecting his son from the murderous Herod.

This was way before the apostle Paul preached to and converted men and women of other nations. Are you beginning to see the connection between Isaiah 60’s words and Matthew’s account? They presented valuable gifts to the baby and his parents, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some scholars say the incense and myrrh are to foreshadow his crucifixion and burial. I have a little bottle of Frankincense from Israel

up here if you'd like to smell it. This is an appropriate transition to the Lord's Supper. For although we just celebrated the Messiah's birth, we know the rest of the story, so today, we celebrate his last act with the disciples before his death and resurrection. The elements of bread and juice represent his body and blood given for us because of our human sin. Through him, we are saved and loved.

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:9-10 ^{NIV}).

// **Let us pray.**

Omnipotent and loving God, we praise you and thank you for your Son, Jesus. We ask you to help us carry this message of the wise men into our lives throughout the week, as we also seek direction to share our faith and your assurance with others. May these elements of bread and juice help sustain our faith reminding us of your sacrifice. Through service, may we shine your glorious light beyond ourselves into the world for others to see. It is in your Son, Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**