

**01.04.26 ~ 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas Day**

**“Moments of Decision”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Words of Prophecy**

**Isaiah 60:1-6** <sup>NIV</sup>

Pew Bible 639

<sup>1</sup> “Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.  
<sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
but the Lord rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.  
<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
<sup>4</sup> “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.  
<sup>5</sup> 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.  
<sup>6</sup> 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 Are the Words of Wise Prophecy.**

**People: Thanks be to God!**

**Words of Wisdom**

**Matthew 2:1-12** <sup>NIV</sup>

Pew Bible 835

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen

when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

**Leader: These Are Words of Decision.**

**People: Thanks be to God!**

**Please pray with me:**

God, you are the Lord of our lives. We come to worship today on the first Sunday of the New Year with apprehension of what this year might bring. Yes, it is an exciting chance to start over with resolutions and goals, but for some who are missing loved ones or are in crisis, it is hard. We pray for them and for your intervention and comfort. As we come upon moments of decision, please direct us now and all year, both as a church and as individuals. Let us begin the new year with reflection and vision casting for ourselves and our church. As we worship, study your Scripture, and observe communion, help us to experience the incarnation of Jesus. Please speak through this message and messenger as we carry on the spirit of Christmas! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

-----

Happy New Year! This is the last Sunday of Christmastide, for tomorrow is Epiphany! Are you writing 2026 or having trouble like I am? This will be the last week for both the card basket and our decorations, so if you wish to take a photo by the tree, please stay after. Also, notice the quilts on the back pews as part of Food Mission fundraiser.

Last week I reviewed the New Year's theme, Roots and Branches, so I hope you've been thinking about ideas we can explore. Today though we are starting with the ultimate foundation of our faith, Jesus, the root of Jesse, so we can carry the Christmas message forward. The prophet Isaiah foretold the coming Messiah, messages we heard during Advent Old Testament readings. So, bear with me as we build our theme from the ground up, so to speak, starting with Jesus' birth, next week baptism, and eventually on into his ministry so that we understand the foundations of

our faith. During these winter months, however, we will go further back into the Hebrew Scriptures, God's purpose for us, how creation feeds, supports, and demands our faith, and how our Christian faith was built over time in Biblical history. Let's begin.

As we know from the Christmas message, God's glory came to Israel and her people. But first, in the Isaiah passage, the people are returning from Babylonian exile. He is encouraging them with what to expect. Though desperate for their war-decimated homeland, Zion (or Jerusalem) would see the various nations help the exiles by providing abundant supplies; and the people would finally realize their bounty comes not just from their homeland or their own handiwork adapting to exile, but from God's favor toward their work and resilience while in exile. God will reward their faithfulness, obedience, and endurance. The wise prophet says that upon their return, they will praise God for his grace that they received in surviving the circumstances. A common desert beast of burden, the camel, would help bring their gold and frankincense earned in exile back to Jerusalem as God proclaims. The prophet/poet was describing merchant tribes east of Palestine. Kedar was famous for flocks, and the fattest rams came from Nebaioth, perfect for sacrificing on God's altar. It was also fulfilled when in Ezra 6:9, the decrees of Darius were issued to furnish the Jerusalem temple with bulls, rams, and lambs for burnt offerings to God. This prophecy was time sensitive to the exiles yet also appropriate for Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth. These prophetic stories were embedded in generations of their memory, so it is not surprising that they recognized a prophetic fulfillment and how similar to the events in our Matthew passage for today.

Remember the shepherds in the fields minding their own business?

An angel of the Lord appeared to them:

. . . and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people . . . <sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:9-10, 13-14 <sup>NIV</sup>)

When the shepherds arrived in Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph with the child, the prophecies (over 100 in Isaiah alone) all came true and would continue to be fulfilled over time and eternity. Nations would come to Jerusalem to bring wealth and riches like gold, frankincense, flocks, silver, and myrrh as offerings.

In Matthew, the conflict was between the darkness of Herod’s ambitious rule and the inbreaking holy light of Jesus. The true conflict was between God’s chosen ruler of the Kingdom, Jesus, and Rome’s chosen ruler, Herod. Herod was jealous and wanted to protect his throne. The Magi (in Greek, *Magoi*) that Herod enlisted as spies were wise men - - literate and politically savvy. They came from the East and certain translations call them magicians or astrologers. They followed orders, bringing gifts fit for royalty to this baby. Western tradition claims there were three: Balthasar (Arabia), Melchior (Persia), and Caspar (India), so that is where the “three gifts” and “three kings” ideas come from. In Eastern tradition, however, there are twelve Magi, and three gifts of gold (might represent royalty, his purity or deity), frankincense (representing the fragrance of His life), and myrrh (used for anointing or embalming might represent His sacrificial death).

But when these three “kings” saw the star had stopped over Bethlehem, and viewed the virgin Mary and her baby, they were filled with supernatural joy. Remember that these men were considered Gentiles, so their acceptance of a new king was a significant marker for Jesus’ later ministries and especially foretold of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles after Christ’s resurrection. Jesus was even rejected by his own people but accepted by Gentiles.

The Magi had a momentous decision to make as Herod’s spies. Herod falsely said to them he wanted to know the location so that he could worship this child too; but in hindsight, we know that Herod planned to issue death warrants to any young boys who were born, so that he would be the only ruler. The Magi or three kings had been warned by God in a dream of Herod’s plot to kill the children, especially Jesus. So, their decision mattered: would they report back to Herod, allow the genocide, and miss the reward of this divine revelation they witnessed? Or would they ponder this in their hearts as Mary had, wrestling with God’s divine gift to culture, society, law, and personal faith? You know their decision; they avoided Herod and Jerusalem and decided to go different routes back to their homelands, not to be mentioned again.

Given all that political discord and the responsibility of leadership to their nations, what decision do you think you would have made had you been in a similar position? Do we believe it when the Holy Spirit influences our thoughts and decisions? Do you have dreams that are clear about your actions, vision, and mission in life? Many of us are in the second or third acts of our lives, and the new year is a good time to reflect on God’s will for our later years. So, ponder God’s divine intervention in

your own life, past and present. Then ask yourself, ok, now what am I going to do about it this year? How does God's influence affect my spiritual disciplines, prayer life, goals, vision, decisions, or personal interactions? As we prepare for communion, ask the Lord to illuminate in your mind his desire for you for 2026. May it be strengthening and outreaching, using your wisdom in some new way to influence others, believers or not. May Christ utilize your strong and rooted faith to build branches of hope and salvation with others who need Jesus. Amen! ||

**Pray with me now:** Steadfast God, we thank you for your son, Jesus. Help us to digest these words and remember them so that we strengthen our relationship with you, Jesus, and each other. Help us to share where we see Christ influencing our daily lives. Make us spiritually prosperous this season as we ask you to fill this sanctuary with those seeking your presence and to open opportunities for invitation. May our moments of decision be swift and Godly. Bless these elements as we confess our sin and welcome you into our hearts remembering your ultimate sacrifice on the cross. In the holy name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.