

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 3, 2021

Epiphany Sunday

PRELUDE    *“We Three Kings”*

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Good morning, my friends! And Happy New Year! I’m glad to be here with you on this third day of the new year, before we get any further into 2021. After the year we’ve had, it feels especially good and right to gather for worship, to pray for God’s blessing, and to seek the holy wisdom we need to move in to this year with faith and trust, so that we might walk in kindness and live by love, and do our part in making this year one of light and peace. We come together today to be reminded, as we are every Sunday, that we are not walking this road alone, but accompanied by the God who has promised to never leave our sides, and the friends and companions who, by the grace of God, are joined together with us in the Body of Christ. Welcome to worship.

Before we go any further, let me remind you that we will be celebrating communion today. If you haven’t already, I invite you to pause the recording so you can get something to serve as the bread and the cup, so that we can feast together. And if you are inclined to follow along and join in the songs and prayers, the PDF that accompanies this video link will furnish all of the words of our worship.

**SONG    *“Angels, from the Realms of Glory”***

Angels, from the realms of glory, Wing your flight o’er all the earth;  
Ye who sang creation’s story, Now proclaim Messiah’s birth:  
Come and worship, come and worship, Worship Christ the newborn King.

Sages, leave your contemplations, Brighter visions beam afar,  
Seek the great desire of nations, Ye have seen his natal star:...

Saints before the altar bending, Watching long in hope and fear,  
Suddenly the Lord, descending, in his temple shall appear:...

**SETTING UP THE CRECHE**

Look who finally made their way into the creche – and with three days to spare, no less! I know it may feel like they’ve been delayed at the airport or stuck in traffic, distracted by a scenic overlook or blue light special, but we forget these folks had a long way to travel. They had gifts to assemble, camels to saddle up, borders to cross, prophecies to untangle, languages to learn. All of which leads me to wonder why they bothered in the first place. What was so compelling about that star that they packed up and headed into the night, unsure of where they were going, and when – or if – they might return.

I remember my last semester of seminary when, like all of my classmates, I was scrambling to find a job. Committed to being faithful to the call I had accepted from God, I threw open the perimeters and boldly announced I would go wherever God wanted me to go. Absolutely certain that that would be Vermont. I sent my profile to churches across the land, and then whittled the options down to a short list of two possibilities in Vermont, one in Maine and one in Wisconsin (I have no idea how that one snuck in, but it did...) I remember letters and phone calls from the search committee in Maine and then telling my friends, I was going to say no, too many potatoes and trees, too few people. And then there

was another phone call. When I hung up, I turned around and said, guess who's going to Maine? Why? I could tell you about interests and Bible Studies, outdoor adventures and compelling chairperson sweet talk, but mostly it came down to knowing this was a road I needed to travel, a call God wanted me to embrace, a star that compelled me to come.

It really isn't about packing bags, leaving home and heading out for destinations unknown; but it is about living with eyes wide open to the stirring presence of God. About seeing the stars that infiltrate and soften our darkness with the message that a new day's dawning. About recognizing the holy when it surfaces among the ordinary, bringing with it the melody of wonder. And about being willing to push ourselves out of the easy chair of familiar thoughts and well-worn routines to go in search of unprecedented possibilities, unrecognized companions, unbelievably good news. The journey will change us, but God and the Child beckon us to come. To see. To worship. To offer our gifts. And then to go home by another way, sharing the story of all we've seen and heard, reflecting the light that has led us this far.

OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

**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.**

(Glenn Mitchell, and posted on [MINemergent's Daily Communique.](#))

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'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.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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." When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON

What was that star that shone over Persia, or wherever those magi were from? The one that burst through the clouds and in through the night, that poked them in the eye until they roused from whatever

daydream or nightmare they were caught up in? The tangled task at work that had them working long hours and still they couldn't leave it behind when they headed home for the night. The football game, snow shoveling, packing up and putting away ornaments, nail biting mystery, Netflix marathon. Pandemic spikes and shutdowns, political shenanigans and showdowns. Whatever it was that had them on the edge of their seats or stretched out cold, wound up tight and ready to explode or bored to tears and lulled into a stupor, something burst in upon them, stood them on their feet and at high alert, and pointed them toward the door. Up and out in record time, they were putting the pieces together and plotting their course from the road, once they were underway. What was that star, and how did it even begin to communicate all of the compelling urgency that led them to drop everything and simply walk away?

I don't begin to even have a theory about whether it was a once in 800 year conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn, or a once-in-forever creation by God used to specially announce the fulfillment of ancient promises and the arrival of the Messiah. If the angel glow that burst upon the shepherds and serenaded them in the dead of night was the same or a different light from the one that worked as a beacon to lead the magi from Persia to Bethlehem, a journey that may have taken as long as two years. What I do know is that the birth of Jesus, the coming of God-with-Us, the birth of the Messiah, the arrival of the one who was born King of the Jews was wrapped in and infused with light. A light that catches the eye, stops the breath and takes control of the room. A light that softens the darkness, that sends shadows and suffering scurrying, that brings an end to hatred and oppression, violence and cruelty and ushers in a new day of peace.

This time of year, we talk a lot about the light that shone on hillsides and in foreign lands, sent to announce the birth of Jesus, and to encourage people to come and see, come and worship; but we also talk about Jesus himself as being the light. That in his life and ministry, love and servanthood he pushed back the darkness, said no to hatred and violence, and ushered in a new day of peace and hope, mercy and love. That's a lot of light, and on days like these, days that are short and cloudy, days that are full to overflowing with suffering and pain, violence and protests, meanness and hostility, it feels wonderful. I want to turn off the news and sit inside on a cold day, plant myself in front of a south facing window and just soak up the sun, let the light warm me and soothe my aching spirit while I give thanks for the gift of light, and turn it all over to Christ.

And yet... somehow I don't think that's where the gift stops or the story ends. God is indeed generous and the light is a hope-filled, love-laced gift that I'll forever need in my life. And... Jesus invites me to join with him in shining that light, in pushing back the darkness, in planting the word of hope and the promise of peace. Jesus summons me out of my recliner in front of that sun-baked window, just before I doze off, and calls me out into the darkness where I can reflect his light, share his love, and do his work.

I loved the story I heard the other night from Steve Hartman on CBS' "On the Road". For the second time, Steve told the the story of a 73-year old woman who had a broken ceiling light, and so she called an electrician to get it replaced. John Kinney came and fixed the light and then spent the weekend thinking about Gloria and her house, and the ways in which that light was the least of her problems. It was clear that she was too poor to make any repairs and too prideful to ask for help. So John went back to her house and started working for free. And then he took his friends with him. And he started a Facebook page, and titled it "Nice Old Lady Needs Help," at which point he got even more volunteers. He says they weren't trying to rebuild her whole house, but together, they've rebuilt her porch and closed up the holes raccoons were using to gain entrance to the house; they've put in all new electrical and plumbing, new walls and windows, backyard lawn and front porch steps. Gloria says, don't pinch me, because I don't want to wake up" and John says, it's just what you're supposed to do. They have

turned her old eye sore of a house into a sight for sore eyes, and now are taking steps to keep the effort going. They've formed a group called Gloria's Gladiators, and are starting chapters all over the country, groups that will help seniors like Gloria.

This is a season of light. We give thanks for the light that shined on the magi and led them to Jesus' home where they could worship him and present their gifts. We give thanks for the light that God has brought to the world in coming among us in Jesus, pushing back and dispelling the darkness and bringing us hope and promise, joy and love. And in gratitude we offer ourselves to God, that in our living and our loving, our work and our witness, we too can shine Christ's light, share God's love, live God's way. It's just what we're supposed to do. Amen.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

An older couple did not think masks or distancing were necessary and they didn't want to give up their fun things; both have now tested positive and the husband is in the hospital with pneumonia. Please pray that they will be ok and perhaps be more careful and take it more seriously

#### PASTORAL PRAYER *"Light in the World"*

Holy Jesus, you are the light in the world. Shine in the dark places where there are wars and where people hurt each other. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.** *(light a candle)*

Holy Jesus, you are the light of the world. Help our leaders know how to run this country, this state and this town so that everybody's needs are met, especially those who are suffering. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.** *(light a candle)*

Holy Jesus, you are the light of the world. Shine in the dark places where people are ill or sad. Please bring help and healing, especially to those battling COVID. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.** *(light a candle)*

Holy Jesus, we are your lights in the world. Help us to be prepared to show people your light by loving them. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.** *(light a candle)*

Holy Jesus, we are your lights in the world. Help us to be prepared to put the needs of others before our own needs for your sake. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.** *(light a candle)*

Holy Jesus, we are your lights in the world. Help us to be prepared to look out for you and listen out for you so we can follow you in everything we do. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.** *(light a candle)* (John Davies, *Hay and Stardust*)

#### PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

#### OFFERING

As the magi of old, guided by a light in the night sky, brought gifts of gratitude to God, so we bring our gifts. May these gifts be a source of light to those in need. May they strengthen the church's ministry in this place and witness to our community. May they give glory to God and offer mercy and welcome to all God's people. Let us bring who we are and share what we have, in order that the presence of God might be known in our midst, and the light of God might shine on all we meet. Thanks be to God.

#### SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

##### Words of Invitation

This is Holy Communion for a Journey Sunday. It is the Second Sunday after Christmas, the Sunday three days after New Years, and three days before Epiphany, and, in the old song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" it is the ninth day – the day when the "gift" is nine people dancing.

So come to this table of ... one star for following, bread and cup for sharing, three days of New Year, at least four still-traveling camels, and many, many hopes for the world.

Come to this table, even if you want to be *laying* everything down because you are so weary of being fearful, isolated or essential to everyone but you.

Come to this table if you are *swimming* in Zoom, virtual education, financial risk, or grief.

Come to this table if you *milke*d all the joy from Christmas – enough to carry you into 2021 ... or not nearly enough.

Come to this table, if you have stopped *dancing*, even though you are carrying many gifts, or you need to be healed by watching for the *dance* in snowflake or puppy play, in friend or stranger, in the old story of another path home, and the warm bread and sweet cup shared right now.

### Words of Remembering

We remember in this New Year with the fearfulness of the pandemic and hope that it will be ended – not only the journey of the magi guided by a star, but all the oases where they rested and the people they met, who lived in those places and shared their food.

We remember a Child born to change everything and the endangerment of many children, and we remember that the baby named Jesus grew up to help people in their hurting and loss, traveled as many roads as we do, and taught us with simple words we can understand, and stories we come to many times to find new meaning.

At Passover he blessed unleavened bread. and poured wine and love freely. At Emmaus, he prayed and broke the bread, but sent us to find the cup in the world.

### Prayer of Consecration

Emmanuel, God, you are with us, in our lonely nights, following so-distant stars. We are carrying our old years and opening our new ones, always hoping, for an oasis for each of us and a blessing on earth, in the form of bread in our hands, and the cup we lift.

May this bread and cup be so sacred we never lose the Star's shine, ignore a New Year embedded in every day, or forget the Christ of the Dance, and the invitation to joy. Amen.

### Sharing of the Elements

When he was at table with his friends Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and offered it to them, saying: Take and eat, this is my body broken for you. Let us now share this bread.

**It is the gift that reminds us of our gifts.**

After supper, he took the cup. Lifting it first in thanksgiving to God, he offered it to his friends, saying: Take and drink, this is my life and my love poured out for you. Let us drink deeply.

**So that we may always travel on.**

Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

### Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

**We have been led, Holy One, by your light. We have been fed by your presence. Now, send us with your blessing, and by your grace give us new hearts to love and serve you. Amen.**

### SONG “One Small Child”

One small Child in a land of a thousand, One small dream of a Savior tonight,  
One small hand reaching out to the starlight, One small city of life. Oh

One king bringing his gold and riches, One King ruling an army of might,  
One king kneeling with incense and candlelight, One King bringing us life. Oh

See him lying, a cradle beneath him, See him smiling in the stall.  
See his mother praising his Father, See his tiny eyelids fall.

One small light from the flame of a candle, One small light from a city of might,  
One small light from the stars in the endless night, One small light from a face. Oh  
See the shepherds kneeling before him, See the kings on bended knee.  
See his mother praising his Father, See the Blessed Infant sleep.

One small Child in a land of a thousand, One small dream in a people of might,  
One small hand reaching out to the starlight, One small Savior of life. Oh

#### BENEDICTION

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you.  
God has loved us from before all time.

In our here and now let us receive and reveal God's love, through the grace of Jesus Christ, and the  
power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)