

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 9, 2022

Epiphany Sunday

PRELUDE “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Epiphany: to show forth, to make visible – the presence of God in Jesus, the presence of God among us

CALL TO WORSHIP

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

We have seen the star in the sky and have come to worship the Christ Child.

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

The star is resting over Bethlehem, and we come rejoicing, overwhelmed with joy.

All: Let us bring the gift of our hearts and the gift of our lives to worship our God of light and everlasting love.

(Debbie Gline Allen, UCC Worship Ways)

HYMN No. 136 “The First Noel” (vs 1-5)

The first Noel, the angel did say, Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep, On a cold winter’s night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star Shining in the east, beyond them far,
And to the earth it gave great light, And so it continued both day and night...

And by the light of that same star Three wise men came from country far;
To seek for a king was their intent, And to follow the star wherever it went...

This star drew nigh to the northwest, O’er Bethlehem it took its rest,
And there it did both stop and stay, Right over the place where Jesus lay...

Then entered in those wise men three, Full reverently upon their knee,
And offered there in His presence Their gold and myrrh and frankincense...

OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

O God of Light and Love, who shines in our hearts as brightly as the Bethlehem star, we come together to give you praise. You have come to us in the form of a newborn babe, and our hearts are filled with awe and with joy. We rejoice in your love for us, and we are grateful. Yet there are times when we are drawn away from your light. We may feel inadequate, unworthy, or less than perfect. We forget that we are your children, your beloved creations, and that you reach out for us even when we turn away from you. Forgive us, O God.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

The night is gone and the day has come. Christ, the Light of the World, born in the person of Jesus, reminds us that God’s light and love are for all of us — no matter who we are and no matter what we have done. We are loved and forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

(Debbie Gline Allen, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 2:1-15

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.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

SERMON

I used to have a parishioner who was really into astronomy. He had a telescope that he loved to set up so he could watch the night sky. A few times he brought it to the church and invited folks to gather around in a large parking lot with little to no tree cover, so they could join him in studying and exploring the expanse of night sky that stretched before them. Don't ask me for a lot of details about the telescope or what they looked at, because I already told you everything I know. It's one of the few church activities we offered that I didn't participate in, and I honestly don't know anything about his telescope, or what they had their eyes on. Were they scanning a routine sky (if there is such a thing) or focusing on a special event? I doubt they ever gathered in that parking lot in January, but I'm certain they were there in different seasons with different skies on display. All of which I think it really cool, even if I didn't have a burning desire to join them.

I wish I could tell you all of that has changed, but I can't. Almost every night, we listen to Spokane news and weather, and it's not an uncommon thing, especially in the summer, for them to tell us what's going to be happening that night that we absolutely have to go outside and observe. Meteor showers or northern lights, a lunar eclipse or blood moon. If you're into the sky, you know the options better than I do, so I won't embarrass myself further by listing what I know little to nothing about. What I will confess to you is that right out our back door is a 2,750 foot long grass air strip with a breathtaking view of Lake Coeur d'Alene off one end. Light is not a problem, nor is our view of the sky limited by anything. Wide open view with a perfect place to stretch out on a blanket and take in a show. We might be visited by deer or elk, but is that really such a problem? But no, 9 years and I have yet to put in an appearance and for absolutely no good reason. Inertia, mostly. Indifference. Occasionally I get up during the night, look outside and wonder if someone left a light on, say, wow, will you look at that moon, and then crawl back into bed. Pathetic.

Contrast all of that with travelers from the east who spent some significant amount of time journeying from wherever they were from to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem, because they'd seen a star in the

sky. A star that in some mysterious way communicated to them that a child had been born king of the Jews. I don't know how they got that message about the birth, and I don't know why they cared. They weren't Jews. What difference did the birth of a newborn king make to them? And why in the world would they walk away from everything they had going and hit the road, for who knows how long? And it's not even like this star was an ongoing event. Unlike Hallmark cards and movies try to show, the story doesn't tell us that the star went up in the sky and stayed there to lead the way for the travelers every step of their long journey. It says they observed the star at its rising; and then later, after they left Herod with instructions to go to Bethlehem, then we're told the star reappeared to lead them the final stretch. If it had been a strobe light type of beacon, their arrival and the questions they were asking wouldn't have caused such a commotion in Jerusalem. No, I think this star is one they found because they were paying attention; they knew what they were looking at and they recognized this star as something unusual and unprecedented. It got their attention and held it; it filled them with wonder enough to lead them out and into places they'd never been before; it tugged at their hearts insisting that they needed to see and worship this child who had been born King of the Jews.

For all that they knew, it astounds me what they didn't know. Clearly they hadn't thought their approach through enough to realize that showing up at the home of the officially coronated King of the Jews, asking where they could find the newborn king of the Jews, might not be a prudent thing to do. And if they'd heard anything about this particular King, King Herod, they wouldn't have touched that doorbell for all the insight and answers earth had to offer. This particular King was well known for both his paranoia and his brutality; this King had had one of his wives and several of his sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him; Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor under whom this King ruled, was rumored to have said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. (Elisabeth Johnson, *Working Preacher*, Epiphany 2022) Clearly these travelers knew nothing about this king, and so in their ignorance and innocence, they showed up at his door asking questions about the whereabouts of the child, saying that they had come to worship him.

Herod's response was to call the religious leaders of his day together, and ask them what their scriptures said. Whether they knew it off the tip of their tongues or had to spend some time in Bible Study, I don't know, but their clear and decisive answer was that the Messiah, the King of the Jews was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem. They backed that up with a quote from Micah, and then they went back to doing whatever it was they'd been doing before the travelers showed up and before Herod summoned them. Sort of like me when Kris Crocker tells me there's an astrological wonder happening tonight that I absolutely can't miss. Really? Thanks for the input, but clearly I've got something else on my mind. Maybe a sermon, but just as likely laundry, or a good book. They may have been the religious leaders of their day, but they missed it. No wonder, no attention, no worship for them.

Herod designed and then disguised a murderous plot by pretending interest and openness, and then sent the wise men off to find the child, insisting they send back a report of their findings as soon as they reached their destination so that he could come too and join them in worship. Fortunately for the child, the King and his henchmen couldn't read the night skies the way the wise men could. They saw meaningless points of light where the travelers, the foreigners from another culture and another religion, were able to assemble the signs into a twinkling mosaic that revealed the beautiful portrait of a newborn king. Walking in the light of their star and overwhelmed with joy, they found the child at home with his mother. They knelt down and worshiped him, and laid before him gifts precious and rare: gold, fit for a king; frankincense, worthy of a priest; and myrrh, foreshadowing the suffering by which the child would die. And then, being warned in a dream that Herod was up to no good, the wise men headed home, going around rather than through Jerusalem. While the child and his parents escaped into Egypt where they would wait out the wild and brutal wrath of King Herod.

The child who had been born King of the Jews was hidden in plain sight. Visible to those who were paying attention and open to wonder, ready to give their undivided attention to a star, and to follow wherever it led, to a place and a sight and an experience they'd never known before. The child was unseen and unrecognized by those going about their days doing what they always did, with little sense of expectation or wonder but a large measure of indifference and complacency. This child did not arrive with fanfare or with a blinding blaze of light that demanded the world's attention. Through this child, God slipped into the world quietly, by way of a poor, unremarkable family living in a backwater town. Welcomed and worshiped by strangers and foreigners, by religious outsiders and road weary travelers from far away; while the insiders turned away and went back to their chores, their routines, their ho hum everyday existence, not inclined to be bothered, not prepared for wonder.

I won't promise you that I'll spend multiple nights this coming summer laying on a blanket on the airstrip behind our house, watching the stars. But I will promise you a serious effort to live with more intention and more attention to the wonders and mysteries of the life happening around me. On alert for the presence of God, the movement of the Spirit, the gathering of particles of promise and the whisper of hope. It doesn't do any harm to watch for spotlights and listen for fanfares, but if Jesus' birth tells us anything, it tells us we should also watch in places of humility and vulnerability, among the last and the least, attentive to outsiders and strangers. Now as then, there's every reason to expect God to be hidden in plain sight, so let's pay attention and stay open to wonder. Amen.

HYMN No. 167 *“O Sing a Song of Bethlehem”* (vs 1-2)

O sing a song of Bethlehem, Of shepherds watching there,
And of the news that came to them From angels in the air:
The light that shone on Bethlehem Fills all the world today;
Of Jesus' birth and peace on earth The angels sing away.

O sing a song of Nazareth, Of sunny days of joy,
O sing of fragrant flowers' breath, and of the sinless Boy:
For now the flowers on Nazareth In every heart may grow;
Now spreads the fame of His dear name On all the winds that blow.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

It's dark out there, Holy One; dark and cold. Some days it seems like the sun doesn't shine at all; it takes a vacation while we endure snow and clouds and air inversions that collect smoke and engulf us in it. We know all too well the fragility of life when the beauty and bounty of snow turn to avalanche danger, or warm air brings rain which leads to ice. We listen to reports of extreme weather and devastating winds, of empty cupboards and rising costs, of record breaking Covid cases and hospitals overwhelmed with the sick and dying yet again. We mark the anniversary of an event at the capital, while we argue with each other about whether it was a protesting crowd or a rioting mob, an assault on democracy or expression of free speech. Russia sends troops to the Ukrainian border while North Korea launches a missile while the Taliban engages in search and destroy of all who represent another way. Hatred and hostility, incivility and intolerance, indifference and self-absorption engulf and surround until we wonder who put out the light.

And yet, seasons turn, days lengthen and hope lives on. The calendar tells us sunlight has increased 11 minutes since the solstice, and your word assures us light shines in the darkness and will never be extinguished. We give you thanks for your unrelenting insistence that light reigns and love wins, and ask you to open our eyes and hearts to watch and wait, trust and participate in the certainty that minute by minute, degree by degree, step by step, your new day draws closer. We give thanks for those who give of themselves to care for others: for medical personnel and teachers who serve in ways never

imagined in the face of Covid, for researchers who continue to explore the possibilities and promise of vaccines, and all those who assist with distribution, for the miracle of healing and the gift of new life, for the outpouring of kindnesses in the aftermath of devastation and the coming together of opponents in search of creative solutions, for those willing to speak truth to power and those daring to put themselves in harms' way in order to bring others safely through. Plant your light within us that we might take our place beside others, doing what we can to share kindness, spread joy, offer hospitality, speak truth, live in love and reflect your light.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer Jesus taught his friends, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

Some time in December, Jenniffer approached me before church and told me that she had just learned there was an outrageous number of homeless families in Osburn. Outrageous is my word; she used a number that was high enough that I wouldn't dare to try and quote her now. Way too many families for such a small community. As we agreed she would, she explored what's being offered to these families, and reported back that in addition to tapping into the Wallace Christmas Fund and the Food Banks, both of which we gave to in December, they also have a program called Bites to Go. Bites to Go is a program at the Osburn school that provides students with food supplies they can take with them at the end of the school week, food that families can eat over the weekend. When I googled "Bites to Go" I learned that Second Harvest has a program with that name, so I'm guessing Osburn's program is connected to Second Harvest, but I don't know that for a fact. What I do know is that our Executive Committee voted in December to donate \$500 of our Emergency Aid Fund to Osburn's Bites to Go program.

When you give to the Emergency Aid Fund, that's one of the ways we put your money to work. Your gifts also allow us to respond to people in need of a warm meal, a place to sleep, a tank of gas or any of a variety of other requests. Your gifts help people make their way through tough times, and help express the love of God and the care of this community. Thank you for making this outreach possible.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

O God, we come to you seeking to be as wise as the Magi, who gave of their most precious treasures — symbols of the giving of themselves to the Christ Child. May these gifts be a source of light in places where your light and love are needed most. Amen. (Debbie Gline Allen)

HYMN No. 166 "We Three Kings"

We three kings of Orient are: Bearing gifts we traverse afar –
Field and fountain, moor and mountain – Following yonder star.
O star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain: Gold I bring to crown Him again,
King forever, casing never Over us all to reign...

Frankincense to offer have I; Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, all raising, Worship Him, God on high...

Myrrh is mine: its bitter perfume Breathes a life of gathering gloom –
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, Sealed in the stone-cold tomb...

Glorious now behold Him arise: King and God and Sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia! Earth to heaven replies...

BENEDICTION

The night has gone and the Light has come!
May the light of the Bethlehem star,
the wisdom of the Magi,
and the hope that the Christ Child brings be with you always. Amen.

(Debbie Gline Allen)