

January 3, 2021 Epiphany/2nd Sunday of Christmas
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

[John O'Donohue, Beannacht: A Blessing for the New Year, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rYnWCophIM&feature=youtu.be>.
Illustrated Advent for Families in Light and Darkness, page 1, 2019,
with a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor in Learning to Walk in the Dark, page 13.
Michel Martin's interview with Rev. William H. Lamar IV on NPR's All Things Considered, January 2, 2021,
<https://www.npr.org/2021/01/02/952897254/agency-and-perseverance-pastor-reflects-on-new-years-eve-watch-night-services>]

Arise, beloved.

Shine, for your light has come.

The glory of the lord has risen upon you. Amen.

Today in worship we celebrate Epiphany, the liturgical end of the Advent-Christmas cycle.

I know some of you appreciate these technicalities, so humor me here:

Epiphany is always on the 6th of January,
always 12 days after Christmas,
and only rarely on a Sunday.

So today we nudge over the 2nd Sunday of Christmas and give Epiphany a little air time.

Some of you are counting on your fingers and singing quietly the 12 days of Christmas...

I'll save you a step: That means today is the 10th day of Christmas (that's ten Lords a-Leaping).

The bridge between Christmas and Epiphany, with New Year's thrown in...it is hard to resist.

Epiphany literally means manifestation, revelation, as in: God is revealed in Jesus.

As in Christ's light is revealed in you, and in me, in this community.

As in, the night doesn't overcome, the light shines and its reflection changes everything.

In our reading from Isaiah, looking forward to a time after exile,

the prophet speaks to an anxious and once-heartbroken community:

"Rise, shine, your light has come.

God's glory has risen, finally arisen, on you."

And today we also hear Matthew's version of the ancient story.

Unlike Luke's take with the shepherds and angels,

in Matthew's rendition, it's the wise men, these astrologers skilled at tracking the night sky,
who seek and find Jesus and his parents.

The theories about *who* these wise ones were, or *what* they witnessed, are abundant.

For those who got a peak at Jupiter and Saturn in December, it only made our imaginations more vivid.

They were not only wise about the stars, but wise about the politics of the hyper-vigilant, angsty King Herod. Years in advance, he's perceiving the threat Jesus will bring, and Herod's oppressive tactics kick-in in force. Remember that right after this visit, Joseph and Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt seeking sanctuary, refuge. Only verses after that, Herod is ordering the massacre of little ones, traumatizing generations because of his own insecurities.

Truth is: Already in these very first chapters of the gospel, God is showing the world—very physically—a new way of salvation, of healing. That's Epiphany!

In recent years on this Sunday we've partaken in what I call Holy Movement.

We venture out of the pews and engage in a variety of activities, practices, around the sanctuary.

Clearly this year is different, but over these last days I've been musing about how we can embody some of this holy movement, these practices, from our homes.

Today I offer some reflection and an invitation to holy movement, to practice.

The first thing I've been reflecting on is light and darkness.

In Advent Nan Knutsen got us thinking about the spiritual power of darkness.

Epiphany is built on the power of light: light shining, revealing.

Many of us know well the line from John's gospel that is central to Holden Evening Prayer:

The light shines in the darkness... and the darkness does not overcome it.

Let me level with you here.

As Zach and I plan worship, more and more these lines carry tension for us.

At once I love them, AND I am aware of how over the centuries Christianity has come to depend on the binary of light and dark, portraying light as good and holy, and darkness as bad and evil.

Think of the classic heroes and villains in everything from old movies to children's cartoons.

Especially as we struggle with our structures of racism, I can't help but name this tension.

I don't want our sacred scripture or our communities to perpetuate this binary unknowingly,

to quietly use a frame that harms those with darker skin and thereby those with lighter skin.

In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to reimagine our understanding of darkness.

Instead of the usual frame where light and darkness are in opposition, light casting out darkness, she moves us toward light and dark existing together in balance.

Barbara Brown Taylor wonders, "What can light possibly mean without dark?"

So it's in that spirit that I offer this first holy movement, this practice:

Dear ones, notice light and darkness.

Notice it in speech, in language.

Notice it in images.

Notice it around you, the complexity, the clarity, the beauty.

Notice it in yourself and dare push yourself to seek out the balance that Barbara Brown Taylor invites.

Many of us like to light a candle to pray. I do.

That's great, do that, but also (and I'm serious) try praying in the dark,

and for those who already do this, give it some reflection.

Dare to rest with God, even taking just a few deep, holy, breathes,

in the dim, in the dark, like in the later afternoon or in the morning, before you flip on the light switch.

Notice what you feel in that dim space, how do you experience the holy in darkness?

Notice the holy stirring in the light and in the darkness.

The next thing I've been reflecting on is thresholds.

Isaiah proclaims a threshold for the people.

The wise men navigate a threshold and go home by another way.

Back around the time of George Floyd's murder I preached about Thresholds, and that image has stuck with me, and then some,

particularly after another police shooting on Wednesday,
another trauma felt especially deeply by BIPOC folks.

We are on the cusp, at the doorway, in the threshold:

the threshold of this new year with new and old politics,
the threshold of learning and insight and well worn sin,
the threshold of a vaccine with still so much sorrow and loss.

At the threshold, we reflect on the past. We look to the future. We seek God's grace, God's blessing.

In an interview yesterday on National Public Radio, host Michel Martin talked with the Reverend William Lamar IV, the pastor of Metropolitan AME Church in Washington DC.

They were discussing Watch Night Services, the late-night worship services common in many African American churches on New Year's Eve.

These services date back to prayer vigils kept on the eve of the signing of the Emancipation proclamation on January 1st, 1863.

Reflecting on this year's message, Rev. Lamar said,

"You know, a lot of people talk about 2020, how awful it was as if 2020 had agency.

But 2020 did nothing to us.

The most egregious things that happened were because of our own systemic racism,
because of our own refusal to challenge capitalism,
because of our own refusal to grant universal health care.”

Rather, he countered, “2020 did not do that to us;

the American refusal to treat human beings as human beings did that to us.”

“So,” he says, “I tried to frame that and to say this is God's vision, and we have agency.

We can make the new world if we move in this direction.”

So here's the holy movement, the practice: find a threshold in your home—I mean it, a doorway between rooms, and spend some time in prayer at that threshold.

You might use post it notes, or a journal, or artwork to record your reflections at your threshold.

If you practice yoga or centering prayer, you might try doing it literally sitting in the threshold.

At the threshold, what is your gratitude for year past? Your regrets? What is up in-the-air?

What needs your confession?

What are your hopes and fears for the year to come?

How will you be part of God's vision for the new year?

What support will you need? And what accountability will you seek? How will you find that?

Thresholds.

Finally, I'm reflecting on reaching out.

I love how the wise men go and bring gifts, and sit in the presence of baby Jesus and his family.

I fully realize that it's not yet safe to do house visits and to come bearing gifts AND I know that you've gotten mighty creative about how you reach out.

Here's the holy movement, the spiritual practice (and, yes, I said spiritual practice, because this isn't just socializing, this is spiritual, this is the sustenance, the very stuff of life with faithful community).

Make a list today of how you *want* to reach out, how you *need* to reach out.

And then slowly, do it.

Not all at once, not in an overwhelming, pressured, way, where you'll give up after four days.

But make a list and find a way that works for you.

You might reach out by phone or text or email or good old fashioned US post.

You might schedule a Zoom or Facetime.

You might send a carrier pigeon, I don't know.

Reach out to say thank you to someone.

Reach out to ask how someone is doing.

Reach out to tell them you are thinking of them, praying for them, that you care about them.

Reach out to share with a friend your struggles—tell them the truth, what a gift.

Reach out to bring a meal or groceries, or cookies, or to shovel snow.

Like I said, you are a creative bunch and getting more creative by the day.

Reach out.

Dear ones, arise, shine, for your light has come. Practice holy movement.

May Christ's light shine in you and through you.

May you experience again God's grace revealed.

May the Spirit stir and take you where you need to go, and where she needs you.

Amen.