

January 2, 2022 Epiphany/2nd Sunday of Christmas
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

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

[Ideas and some quotes from my own sermons on 1-6-19 and 1-3-21. Elisabeth Johnson for this January 6, 2022 in Working Preacher.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-11>. Star Tribune

Opinion article by Robert Vischer on 1-1-22, called American Christian Nationalism: Let's put the Christianity back into Christian politics.]

Arise, beloved.

Shine, for your light has come.

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

I walk most mornings, it's part of my spiritual practice, my health, my sanity.

At this time of year, it's not uncommon that I'll be out in the dark hours, crunching along the sidewalks and paths of north Minneapolis.

A few weeks ago I was walking in the dark, heading directly east.

Thankfully the cardinal directions in this part of the city are seared into my body,

for the darkness was thick

and the horizon wasn't yet offering clues.

As I walked the eastern night sky gradually becoming indigo, and then blue gray,

then some faint purples and pinks.

It was subtle at first, very subtle, but steady. Dawn was coming.

This last week I found myself tromping along another path.

It was late afternoon in the maze of the Trempealeau Wildlife Refuge, the backwaters along the Mississippi River, near the home of my in-laws in Wisconsin.

The clouds were thick and gray as they can be these snowy weeks.

I was walking along a dike road that runs east west.

It was a study in black and white:

black silhouettes of trees and branches and brambles,

against the white snow, tufted by snow,

with occasional glimmers of the iced-in fingers of water beyond.

As the afternoon light began to fade, I turned back, walking west, heading for the warmth of my car.

In the tree covered sections, the gray grew darker still.

It became harder to distinguish shapes, to gauge distance.

The night was coming quickly, steadily.

Today we celebrate Epiphany.

The truth is, Epiphany is one of those churchy, liturgical days that is locked into the calendar.

In the western church, it's always on the 6th of January,
always immediately following the 12 days of Christmas.
Occasionally the 6th lands on a Sunday, but most years,
congregations must make a choice about if and how and when to observe it.
As we do many years, we're observing Epiphany *this* Sunday,
but you can still feel Christmas in the air and see it in our space.

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 light shines in the holy darkness and its reflection changes everything.

In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet looks forward to a time after exile.

To an anxious and once-heartbroken community, Isaiah cries:

"Rise, shine, your light has come.
God's glory has risen—finally arisen—for you."

Today we also hear Matthew's version of the ancient natal story.

Unlike Luke's, with the shepherds and angels,
in Matthew's rendition, it's the wise ones, astrologers skilled at tracking the night sky,
who seek and find Jesus and his parents.

The theories are abundant about *who* these wise ones were, or *what* they witnessed.
They were not only wise about the stars, but wise about the politics of the angsty King Herod.
Ancient historians remind us that Herod the Great was known for "his paranoia and his brutality." (E. Johnson)
Years in advance, Herod perceived the threat Jesus would bring to him and to his ways.
Herod the tyrant is fast to squelch his competition.

Matthew records it in succession in the remainder of chapter 2:

how Joseph is warned in a dream and the holy family flees to Egypt seeking sanctuary.
how Herod, angling to kill Jesus, orders the massacre of *all* the little ones born in Bethlehem.

Can you even begin to imagine the trauma of these families, generational trauma?

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 and practices, all around the sanctuary.
As much as I love the energy of that day, given COVID, and many needing to worship online, we'll wait.
Instead I offer some reflection and an invitation to practice holy movement on your own.

Some of these holy movements may be familiar from previous years, some new.

The first 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.

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

the threshold of this new year, old politics, and new hopes,

the threshold of learning and insight and well-worn sin,

the threshold of omicron,

for the numbers keep rising and the predictions for the weeks ahead are daunting.

At the threshold, we reflect on the past. We look to the future.

We seek God's grace and mercy, God's forgiveness, God's protection, God's blessing.

So here's the holy movement, the practice: find a threshold, perhaps in your home—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.

At the threshold, what is your gratitude for year past? Your regret? 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?

And what support and accountability will you need?

Thresholds.

Next I'm reflecting how Herod's reaction to baby Jesus and Jesus' power ... was anger, was fear.

This kind of fear fuels violence.

We don't need to look far.

Remember last January 6th, the unfolding of the afternoon, your body's response?

In an opinion piece in yesterday's Star Tribune about the rise of Christian nationalism,

Robert Vischer, the Dean of the University of St. Thomas Law School writes:

"Among the heartbreaking images that linger from Jan. 6, 2021:

the 'Jesus Saves' banner being held by rioters entering the Capitol,

right alongside the Confederate flags, nooses and Holocaust sweatshirts."

Later Vischer writes, "Pushing back against Christian nationalism does not require a retreat to some sort of imagined secular space—the resources for resistance are available within Christianity itself."

So here's the holy movement: find yourself a map.

It could be a map of the world, or the nation or your neighborhood.

Use it as a base for your prayers.

Notice the boundaries: the physical borders, the ideological borders, the emotional borders.

Pray for people, for the fears and hopes that live within us all.

Pray for creation, pray for the powers, the leaders, the institutions.

Pray for the new voices, the often-unheard voices, for immigrants and refugees,
and each of us caught in this power.

Use your map to focus your prayers, prayers for...

Families and children at the southern border, for instance.

Or those whose world view differs distinctly from yours, prayers for them, for their families.

And make sure to pray for yourself, and your people, too.

Our prayers are part of our resistance.

Finally, I've been reflecting on light and darkness.

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

I love that AND I'm more and more aware of our need to think again about darkness.

Maybe you've noticed how I've been framing darkness as holy: holy darkness.

For centuries we've depended on the binary that says

light is good and holy, and darkness is bad and evil, think the classic villain in a movie.

We've talked before about this tension.

It's important as a community that is working on racial justice to keep noticing it.

There was a little email back and forth this week between two of my local preaching colleagues.

One said something about this Thursday being

the first anniversary of "that [quote] dark day in our country's history."

That's a phrase that we're going to hear a lot this week, my friends.

It rolls off the tongue.

Media will use it, and unthinking we might, too.

Another colleague, a BIPOC preacher, wisely replied:

"I suggest that when referring to this day we do not call it a 'dark' day.

For in fact it was a white day—an extremely white day—

brimming with white hot racism,
white hot rage, and white hot violence.”

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

Dear ones, notice light and darkness, and all the shades in between.

Notice them in speech, in language.

Notice them in images.

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

God is at work, alive, active.

Notice it in yourself and dare push yourself to seek out the nuance.

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

That's great, do that, but also try praying in the dark—that's what I'm doing on those early morning walks.

Dare to rest with God, even taking just a few deep, holy, breathes, in the dim,
before you flip on the light switch.

There you go: Three practices... Thresholds, Borders, Light and Dark.

Dear ones, arise, shine, for your light has come.

This Epiphany, practice holy movement.

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

May you experience again God's grace revealed in the dark and in the light.

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

Amen.