

Arise, Shine!
Epiphany of our Lord
January 3, 2016
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Texts: Isaiah 60.1-6;
 Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14;
 Ephesians 3.1-12;
 Matthew 2.1-12

As we look together at another of the iconic Christmas narratives, I find myself being drawn into the story and the mythology that unbinds this day when we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. This passage from Matthew 2 is clearly a story full of symbols and hidden meaning that goes beyond the simple plot lines of a narrative. The gospel writer includes this story because of the way it points us toward a profound truth that will be revealed through the entirety of this gospel. What draws me in is the impulse behind the Magi's search. What pushed them to follow that star? Was it intellectual curiosity? Was it some mystical, spiritual quest? Were they simply wanderlusts who would take any excuse for a road trip? I suspect it was probably all of those things.

I suspect it was something deeply human in them that pushed them on this journey; a desire to touch some new spark of life that was unfolding in a nation far from home. They had no connection to this people of God who maybe once was a powerful nation but now was a small and beleaguered people occupied in their own land by a force and power not their own. Maybe that was the impulse. Maybe they believed that this star and the promise of a new king would bring the beginning of Israel's revival and they wanted to be there from the very beginning to pay homage and offer their blessing. As human beings we like being in on the beginning of things. We are attracted to people and places that are vibrant and full of life. We want to be there when new life is born or inaugurated or revealed.

Which leads us to the Psalm for the day. Psalm 72 is one of the royal psalms that was likely sung at the inauguration of new kings in Israel. The Magi were coming in advance of that inauguration; they were eager to pay

homage to a new king as he was *born* in Israel. What this Psalm lays out in the form of prayer is the vision God has for the royal office of Israel. It is a kind of charter for any nation who seeks to reflect the kind of sovereignty God embodies with us.¹ As you read through the Psalm you see very clearly the purpose of political power is to bring about the flourishing of the entire community.

At the Room for All Conference this past October we talked a lot about intersectionality which means that you can't be a single issue organization. If you are interested in justice and inclusion you have to look at the way that all systems of oppression intersect and work from many different angles. One of our leaders talked about a principle in design which says if you want to make a building accessible then focus on the needs of the people with the biggest barriers to accessibility. If you make the building accessible for them, it will be accessible for everyone. A simple example: the ability to push a button on a wall to open a door makes it possible for someone in a wheel chair to enter who has the biggest barrier to entry but it also serves the UPS driver, the father with his stroller, the caterers with their food carts...you get the picture.

This philosophy runs throughout scripture. If you want to know how your government is doing in terms of reflecting the sovereignty of God? Look for the people with the least power, the fewest resources, and the strongest stereotypes. See how they are faring because that you will give you a good sense of how the whole community is doing. In the simplest and most basic sense the question is whether each member of the community is afforded human kindness, human dignity, opportunity to flourish, a chance to be connected to the force of life to which we are all drawn.

For a long time the royal office was limited to the national interests of Israel. But all along you see that this people of God were intended to touch far beyond their national boundaries and cultural interest. They were to be a light to the nations. Isaiah 60 envisions all of the nations of the world being drawn to their light. They are not alone in letting their national interests or their religious convictions lead them to narrow the field of their

¹ D. Cameron Murchison, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 200.

concern. This too is a deeply human impulse. We look to our own, we can become tribal in our instincts.

Here is the reason that Matthew gives us this story and the reason why we set aside a whole day, a whole season, to live into this Epiphany: the salvation that God brings to the world in Jesus Christ is not just for the promised people of God (for Israel). It for all the world. "The Gentiles have become fellow heirs" we hear in Ephesians today. The news of the "boundless riches of Christ"² is to be shared far and wide. This good news is meant to take us far beyond our own tribes and our narrow interests. The light that came into the world through the birth, the life, the ministry of Jesus is meant to spill over and scatter the darkness.

The prophet's word comes to us today: Arise, Shine! This is command. These are marching orders. This is a mandate to capitalize on that human instinct to be drawn toward vitality – to places of new life and vibrancy. This is the very reason why God came to live among us; because we have failed and continue to fail at putting the resources and power of our communities to work for the sake of the poor which means by extension for the whole community.

As I was reading Psalm 72 verse 14, I could not help but hear the news of this week regarding the grand jury decision not to bring charges in the shooting death of 12 year old Tamir Rice. Hear this Word from God in Psalm 72.14: "From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight." That last part grabbed my attention as I thought of this young boy lying in a pool of his own blood while no one rushed to check his pulse or try to put pressure on that wound. His blood was NOT regarded as precious. And this happens over and over again in so many different ways. We draw lines. We make delineations about whose blood is precious and whose cause is worthy and which lives matter.

The Epiphany of our Lord challenges us to Arise, Shine! The Light of God can break into even the most persistent and lingering darkness. We just

² Phrases in quotes from Ephesians 3.6,8, NRSV

need to bring some Kuumba. The sixth principle of Kwanza celebrates creativity and is defined in this way: “To do always as much as we can in the way that we can in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.”³

I mentioned a moment ago the way that Psalm 72 intersected (for me) with the news of this week in a place where the persistent and lingering darkness seems to prevail. Let me balance that with news that came out just before Christmas that puts flesh to this command from Isaiah to Arise, Shine; a beautiful example of Kuumba coming out of the city of Atlanta. There are some churches that partner in downtown Atlanta to provide shelter for some of the homeless men who live on their streets. One day the music director of the Catholic Church saw these men standing in the cold waiting in line for their meal and invited them in and asked if they wanted to sing with him. The Atlanta Homeward Choir was born. They made the news just before Christmas because they were invited to come and sing at the White House and their story spread to all kinds of people who contributed to make their trip to Washington DC possible.⁴ Talk about finding some of the people with the least resources, the fewest opportunities, and the most damaging of stereotypes. The men who are part of this choir talked about the way in which they were finally seen as fellow human beings; shown human kindness and dignity and how this choir is opening up new possibilities that could not have been envisioned before.

The reason this story stayed in my mind isn't about the trip, as heartwarming as that part of the story may be. No, it has to do with the music director that day as he was walking down the street and he saw these men out in the cold with nothing to do and he saw a choir. That moment of Kuumba has stayed with me.

I wonder how many more of these moments go unnoticed among us. I wonder how much light could shine if we would look for ways to

³ You can read about this principle of Kwanza at <http://www.endarkenment.com/kwanza/nguzosaba/kuumba.htm>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/12/21/a-choir-of-homeless-men-performs-where-martin-luther-king-stood/>

contribute to the vibrancy of life around us with a particular eye toward those who are on the edges with the fewest resources, the least power, the strongest stereotype - to be part of the Kuumba that looks for ways to leave this community more vibrant, more verdant, more alive than it was when you first entered.

Throughout this Epiphany season may we all Arise and shine for our light has come!