

## **“Arise! Shine!”**

**Text: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6**

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Let us begin this new year together by discovering our identity as “People of the Light.”

At a Service of Light a few years ago, I quoted Dr. Cynthia Wedel, as saying, “Christmas comes like a shaft of light in the darkness of human despair.” This whole period of time – what we like to call the twelve days of Christmas – from Christmas Day, December 25, to Epiphany (January 6), is all about light. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,” the gospel writer John says. He goes on to say about the Christ-event: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

“The light”, as the gospel writer John uses it and as we experience it at Epiphany, is really a metaphor. When you come down to it, “light” has to do with how we are living our lives – whether, and therefore how, we are living in the light. Or, as the marvelous African song puts it, “We Are Walking in the Light of God, we are walking in the light of God.” ([www.ucclasvegas.org](http://www.ucclasvegas.org) and *Herald Tribune Newspaper*, December 1971).

The word “epiphany” means “manifestation” or a “miraculous appearance”, and it is intended to mark how Christ was shown to the world. Most especially, of course, we see it in the Star of Bethlehem – that star that the wise kings from the Orient – the Magi – followed. Do you suppose the Magi had eyes of faith as they followed the light that guided them to Jesus and later as they continued on their journey? Coming “from the east,” the Magi were not Jewish; they had no part of the sacred promises of God to Israel. And yet they were among the first to bend knee and worship the baby Jesus. The birth of Jesus was so significant on the world’s stage that a special spotlight was required. This was no quickly shot-off fireworks, to be oohed and aahed over and then forgotten, but this was a steady, long-lasting light for the whole world. The Magi therefore remind us that God intends for this good news ... the light ... to be spread to all people everywhere.

As the last line of the familiar hymn’s chorus says it, “Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.”

As “People of the Light,” the prophet Isaiah adds another dimension for us with the beautiful visual image of a sunrise. We all have seen a sunrise that has left us breathless. Remember though...that before the sunrise, there is darkness. “It is as though the world were a blackened stage. No house lights are on, no footlights, no stage lights. The actors cannot see where they are going; they grope their way through their scenes. Then from above the stage, beyond the catwalk, a simple spotlight cuts into the darkness with a cone of brightness, casting a circle on the floor. The light shines on some of the people who stumble blindly in darkness.” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, p.196.*) This sunrise image is a highly symbolic one for the ancient Israelites. Out of the darkness of the exile, Israel, both as a nation and as a people, has been chosen and restored to God’s light through God’s grace. There is now the promise of a new covenant relationship.

Isaiah was clever in using concrete images of light that actually can be seen by human eyes but what's needed to process the light that Isaiah calls "the glory of the Lord" requires the eyes of faith. So, Isaiah's command "Arise! Shine!" is a wake-up call that we lift our eyes to make sure that the light and that glory are truly conquering the darkness and letting the Lord's light arise within us. We need to confront the darkneses that are in the world and the darkneses that are in our souls. Take a moment to do just that! What are the darkneses in the world that bother us and cause us to bristle and wince? What are the darkneses – the pain – the aches that are in our souls?

It is heavy contemplating the darkness!!

Darkness confronted Weldon Nisly as he boarded the TWA flight to Chicago on an unusually cold, snowy Wichita day. His story: We sat on the ground in the plane for over an hour waiting for the plane to be de-iced. We finally took off and headed up into the cloud-covered sky. For what seemed to be an anxious yet awesome eternity we were lost in a dark, clouded world. Suddenly the plane burst through the clouded darkness into the most brilliant world of light I had ever seen. It was breathtaking! The sun was shining like nothing I had ever seen before in a vast universe with clouds for a floor and glorious light to eternity. I often remember this image and experience when I see a dark, cloudy day. I know that light is trying to pierce its way into our clouded world. (Weldon Nisly, "Arise, shine! Your light has come," January 6, 2002, Seattle Mennonite Church Web Site, [www.seattle.wa.us.mennonite.net/sermon20020106.html](http://www.seattle.wa.us.mennonite.net/sermon20020106.html).)

By lifting our eyes of faith and looking around, we can consider and ask the question, Where do we see God's light trying to pierce its way into our clouded world breaking into our clouded world? When we pause and take a quiet moment to do this specific reflecting and seeing, we find hope and even more light. With the Light which is the gift of God's grace, we receive a gentle nudge to pass the light on. "Arise! Shine!" The light has come so that others will be drawn out of darkness into the circle of light. "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60:3) "Arise! Shine! Cries Isaiah, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60:3) In today's vernacular, "You have the light ... now show it! Get into that darkness and start shining."

As People of the Light, we have received the gospel – the Good News of Christ. When someone receives some good news, the natural tendency is to want to share that news with others. That's us today. As a new year begins, I want to encourage all of you to "Arise! Shine!" The prophet Isaiah speaks of a dawning for Israel. It is not enough to receive the light. We are urged as Christians to look for God and then share that light as we have come to know it in Jesus Christ!

As we begin this new year of 2012, let us put on our eyes of faith. What will we see this year? What are we visioning as we step into a new year of opportunities and challenges?

Who we are – our identity as members of First Church – is expressed well in our statement on the front cover of the bulletin. Let us say it together:

**In the heart of West Hartford  
we are called by God to grow together,  
inspiring and engaging one another  
through worship, learning, fellowship and outreach.**

**We actively serve our diverse community and world,  
welcoming and nurturing all people  
in the Living Spirit of Jesus.**

With our eyes and hearts beginning there, we might just need to ask some important questions. How do we get into the darkness and shine? How do we reflect the light? As People of the Light, we need a lens that will enable us to focus more clearly and better or to see either what we've never seen before.

- It may be the lens of scripture.  
Time to read and hear The Word in a new way.
- It may be the lens of the church.  
We need the encouragement and support of a community of faith.
- It may be the lens of worship.  
Feeding our hearts and souls so we can live more fully and be sustained and nurtured through the week.
- It may be the lens of service.  
Getting outside of ourselves to minister to others, to focus on how we can be there for our brothers and sisters.
- It may be the lens of love.  
Compassion and caring are partners of faith and hope.

Our challenge is to focus our eyes of faith and to see the light in the middle of the darkness, a light that signals the presence of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Our challenge also is to trust and discover that Christ is always present – even in times of chaos and confusion. Even in our shadow times – our times of disappointment, failure, temptation and tension – God is going to bounce some light into our darkness. We, People of the Light, are on a journey and it takes a lifetime of looking to develop eyes of faith.

In closing, I would like to tell you about Alexander Papaderos, teacher of Greek culture, politician, doctor of philosophy and a remarkably complete human being. On the island of Crete, next to the mass graves of Germans and Cretans who fought each other so bitterly in World War II, Papaderos has founded an institute for peace which has become the source of bridge-building between the two countries. What kind of vision motivates a man like Papaderos to transcend the focus on the individual self and dedicate his life to compassion and peace?

Papaderos said, 'When I was a small child during the war, we were poor and lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place .... I kept one, the largest piece .... By scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine – in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became [mature], I grew to understand that this was a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light truth, understanding, knowledge – is there, and it will shine in many dark places only if I reflect it.’

‘I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of the world ... and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise.’ (Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (New York: Villard Books, 1989). pp. 176-77).

A Challenge For You: Tomorrow take a mirror and catch the rays of the morning sun and let them shine on your face, in your heart, out into the dark places in the world.

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