

*Nations Shall Come to Your Light*

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*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*January 2, 2022 Epiphany Sunday, Second Sunday of Christmas*

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

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Second Sunday after Christmas and Epiphany Sunday. On Christmas Eve before singing Silent Night, we paused in the beauty of the candle-lit sanctuary to see the light shining in everyone's eyes. It is a symbol for what happens every week. We look for the light in one another, we savor it, and we join all our light together into a force of light that creates a comforting sanctuary around us even when we are apart. The power of that light then shines into the world to do the work of Christ. It all begins the way it did on Christmas Eve, passing from one person to another when we open our hearts, offering the spark of our loving care or compassionate support or inspired insight. Please extend your light today so that even through these screens and the darkness of these days we all feel lifted by it.

**Call to Worship:** Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means to reveal. During the church Season of Epiphany we celebrate revelations or inspired insights of God's manifestation. We look for the Spirit at work in Jesus and in the world and in our own lives.

We need epiphany the way the wise men needed the star and dreams they followed. We need glimpses of God's presence to strengthen our faith and hope, and to keep guiding us to the light through the dark and dust of our desert journeys. We need epiphany especially at moments that are turning points when changes or challenges lie ahead and we and those around us will need its light. We need epiphany right now in this nation and on this endangered planet. We need spiritual truth revealed and wisdom made known.

We can prepare ourselves to receive the epiphanies we need, so let us worship together wide open to all the manifestations of God's light we may find here today in the word and music and silence, and in this loving community.

**Children's Time:** A Massachusetts man I know was hiking by himself in the Baja desert in Mexico, and feeling very lonely. He had gone for days without seeing another human being.

Then one night he saw the glow of a fire off in the distance and decided he would spend the night with the people around it. He didn't care who they were, he craved human company.

As he got closer he saw that there was only one person sitting at the fire, a woman with her back to him. He circled around so as not to startle her and stopped in shock because she was a close friend of his whom he had not heard from in years.

There he was, alone in the middle of a vast wilderness thousands of miles from home, and out of all the billions of people in the world, he found someone he knew and loved and was overjoyed to see!

In a way it was like the wise men following a star to find the Christ child. He followed the light and it led him to a miraculous source of love and joy and peace.

The same thing happens to us. We see someone who shines with a light of love or kindness, or with creativity or insight, or with a word of prophetic truth, and we are drawn to that light, and we cross the distance between us in order to form a connection.

We come to this church looking to connect with that kind of light. The more light we each shine, the more strongly connected our community becomes.

God is the source of all light, the source of love and creativity and insight, and there is something we can do to open wide so that God's light can shine in and through us: pray! Especially if we pray with our heart wide open to receive light back. Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

### **Sermon: *Nations Shall Come to Your Light***

The date January 6<sup>th</sup> has meant Epiphany, a day of glorious light, since the year 361, but just last year the meaning of January 6<sup>th</sup> changed. It now reminds us of Isaiah's description of "darkness covering the earth and thick darkness the peoples."

Isaiah wrote to people in that darkness, "Arise, shine; for your light has come."

Arise and shine—do not stay lost in darkness, do not merely live as you always have. Rise to a new brilliance and glory.

For your light has come—as pure gift. God has given you some of God's own essence to bring to birth here and now to share with the world and transform it.

But how can we arise and shine on a dreary Epiphany Sunday when even the weather reminds us of the troubling shadows that threaten our world?

During Advent I talked about the Christian spiritual path described by the Greek words *kenosis*, *metanoia*, *agape* and *koinonia*.

Ancient Christian spiritual masters discovered this as a law of nature or sacred way that leads the human heart to the light.

To be immersed in the thick darkness Isaiah described is to be emptied, the ego humbled and no longer able to assert its will or make its own way. That's *kenosis*, self-emptying.

The blessed emptiness of the darkness enables us to see the light, as the night makes visible the stars. We see the light of God more clearly in the absence of our ego's artificial lights. "Then you shall see and be radiant." That's *metanoia*.

Then the eyes of our heart open wide and fill with the light of God's unconditional love so that we overflow and shine love into the world. That's *agape*.

Then, Isaiah says, "Nations shall come to your light." The beloved community gathers where God's love shines. The realm of God on earth forms around us. That's *koinonia*.

Advent is a season of *kenosis*. Epiphany is a season of *metanoia*. Epiphany expands our vision of the Spirit moving through and around us in nature and in great prophets like Dr. King or Bishop Tutu and in all loving people.

The *metanoia* of epiphany begins with a yearning. The Magi saw the star because they were watching in the hope that a sign would reveal the manifestation of God's presence and show the path to it.

A woman I know had that yearning. She longed to know what her life calling was. She complained that God was not making her path clear. She wanted sky-writing, like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz writing "Surrender Dorothy" over the Emerald City, or like God sending the Magi a star.

Many people feel this way. It is why the Magi trained themselves to read messages from God in nature and in dreams. It is why fields like Spiritual Direction and Coaching exist, to help us discover our deepest calling and bring forth the light of God within us.

We need that help even when we think we know where we are going. The Magi thought they would find the new-born King of the Jews at Herod's palace in Jerusalem. But God had a different plan.

A man came to a Registered Life Planner to get help charting a course for the next stage of his life. He wanted to start an environmental organization to address the issue of climate change. He felt certain that his calling was to dedicate his life to saving the planet.

As he explored his dream with the Life Planner, he realized that he was called to do something else first. He could not imagine doing this major project without the wise counsel of his father, but they had been estranged for months since they had a terrible argument.

He saw that before he could move forward with his vision for the future, he had to come to a place of forgiveness and healing with his father. It was a much humbler destination, like a stable in Bethlehem instead of a palace in Jerusalem, but it was as holy and meaningful as saving the planet because it was what God was calling him to do in that moment.

How can we find our own path right now? Isaiah said in today's passage, "Lift up your eyes and look around." The first thing we need to do is look if we want to find our way. It sounds simple, but it is not easy because we need to empty ourselves of self-concern in order to let the expanded vision of metanoia happen.

Isaiah was speaking to a people in captivity in Babylon whose homeland had been destroyed. Thick darkness covered them. There was no use lifting up their eyes. There was no way out that they could imagine. Plus, lifting their eyes meant having to face their grief at losing a past they loved and their powerlessness to change it. It takes courage and faith to overcome the impulse to hide our eyes from a horrifying reality.

Isaiah insisted that if his people would only look, they would be transformed. "Then you shall see and be radiant."

This is profound wisdom that we need to understand. We do not have to be brilliant ourselves, our lives do not have to be perfect, all we need to do is lift up our eyes and look at God's light and we ourselves will become radiant.

If we fill with the light of God's love, Isaiah says, "Nations shall come to your light." Have light in yourself, and thousands will find light around you.

The darker the times, the more people are attracted to the light. A church that has filled its eyes with the light of Christ, that has seen and become radiant, will shine a light that will move people. They may not ever set foot in the church, but they will be inspired to find and shine their own light, and the force of light in the world will grow.

Our Future Directions Vision came through a collective epiphany, a time of metanoia that we underwent four years ago. We saw this church shining as “a community of open hearts and minds... extending faithful Christlike love and support to all...a force, not merely a presence, effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.... as we celebrate and follow the way of Christ with Spirit-filled acts of creativity, compassion and love.”

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says (Matthew 5:14a) Marianne Williamson writes, “We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.... We are all meant to shine.” (from *Return to Love*)

Epiphany and metanoia are about letting the Spirit fill our vision so that we become radiant with its glorious light, and we become beacons of it, shining it out into the world through our love and our works.

Epiphany is in many ways the most exciting season of the church year because week after week it tells us to look and see and rejoice in the light. It reminds us that we are in the light even now, and if we will only open to that truth, we will be able to participate in miracles as the Magi did, and people shall be drawn to our light, and the world will be changed by it in ways that we yearn to see.

Let us pray in silence, wordlessly opening to the light...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

A baby squirrel feeding  
on the porch. The gray squirrels  
thought that spring had come.