Sermon Star of Enlightenment
Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany Sunday, January 5, 2025
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As we commemorate Epiphany, a celebration of the light that guided the Magi from the East, our first scripture reading is Isaiah 60:1-6. Isaiah is known for bringing home God's message of inclusivity in surprising ways. In today's scripture, Isaiah not only compares the coming of God into the world as a brilliant light, but also affirms this light will transform those outside of Israel as well as those within. Listen to the Word of God.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you.3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, Matthew 2:1-12, recalls the story of the Magi. The significance of the Magi's journey is not the presents they bring. The significance is their presence in the story at all. Today we remember the magi who followed the light of the star to greet the Light of the world If Christmas celebrates God's embrace of humanity, then Epiphany announces that God embraces all of humanity. All people are welcomed by God. including the Gentile represented by the magi who were guided by the light of a star on a sincere and persistent search for light and truth. This is the word of God.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.' 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."' 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Star of Enlightenment

The text: …wise men from the East came to Jerusalem…Matthew 2:1b

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us the steadfastness of the Magi whose search for light and truth was not disappointed. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Light is woven throughout Holy Scripture as a symbol for God and God's presence in the world. At the beginning of Christ's life, we find the brightness of the Eastern Star…and again at the commencement of Christ's ministry, at his baptism, we get a glimpse of the brilliance of the heavens opening.

In her book "An Altar in the World" Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal Priest, author, and theologian, reflects on her childhood and how her father taught her the practice of paying attention and the importance of reverence. She remembers a night in August during her eighth year when she lay on a small wooden deck that opened off her parents' bedroom with her father and sister. It was the first time she saw a shower of falling stars!

at night she learned these falling stars are called the *Tears of St. Lawrence* and return every August. The celestial perspective enlightened young Barbara, changing the way she viewed the world and herself. On the one hand she felt enormous and like she was a part of the sky and creation. On the other hand, she felt insignificant and small. What was a seven-year-old girl under the weight of the falling stars?

Stars are not only seemingly infinite in their dimensions; they are seemingly infinite in their time scales. The stars that light up our skies connect us with the generations which have come before us who viewed the same constellations we see today. When we pay attention, the stars above shed new light on our perspective of the world, our understanding of ourselves, and instill reverence and awe.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, an intellectual and cultural movement took place in Europe and the Americas known as the Age of Enlightenment. This movement emphasized reason over superstition and knowledge over blind faith. Students of the Enlightenment believed insight and understanding could lead to a more equitable and just society and hoped to free people from the power and control of the unjust hierarchy and oppressive laws upheld by governments and reinforced by religious leaders.

Our beloved pastor, the Reverend Albert Hale was a student of the enlightenment and a leader within the Second Great Awakening, the 19th century revival for evangelism and social reform. He was a graduate of Yale University whose motto, *Light and Truth*, reminded students that light was necessary to illuminate the truth. When he came with the Yale Band from the East in 1835 to lead this abolitionist congregation, some of whose members were conductors of the Underground Railroad, he was seeking "light and truth" in the Spirit of Epiphany and advocating for a more equitable and just society.

The same light of the stars that led the Magi to the Christchild also led enslaved African Americans to freedom along the Underground Railroad as the north star directed runaways toward Canada. According to folklore, the "Drinking Gourd" in the negro spiritual was the Big

Dipper, a constellation that points the way to the North Star and the road to freedom and dignity.

We gather at the beginning of a new year at Westminster Presbyterian Church, under the same stars upon which our founders gazed and the celestial brilliance of this month's planetary parade, to ordain and install those who will lead us in a meaningful year of ministry. We are greeted by the star of Epiphany as a poignant reminder about the nature of the God who calls us to ministry.

Today we celebrate the God who is the light of the world, who joined us in our humanity, and who came for all humanity. Today, we accept the call to lead in the spirit of Epiphany; to shine the light of Christ in the dark and broken places of our world, and when that light is not as bright and clear on the pathways we travel, to accept the call to guide, to understand, to encourage, and to hold one another as we journey together.

May we embrace this new year with the wisdom of the Magi, searching with purpose and intention. seeking light and truth with resolve, reverence, and the practice of paying attention.

May our lives reflect faith, insight, awakening, and enlightenment by what we say and what we choose not to say…by what we do and what we choose not to do…by the way we see the world and the way we treat one another. May we continue to shine the light of Christ as advocates for a more equitable and just society, and may we welcome within this community those who seek light and truth and who long for respect, acceptance, and love.

This is our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, and this is the ministry to which we are called. Led by the star of enlightenment and guided by the One who holds us in the great hands of light, let us arise and shine. Amen.