

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, January 05, 2025
The Epiphany

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz

on

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

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Stand Up! The Daystar Dawns!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

We celebrate today, on the Feast of the Epiphany
We celebrate today one of the most unexpectedly strange feasts on the calendar.
We celebrate the end of the journey of a group of ostensibly Magian priest astrologers
Who have followed what appears to be a star
From their comfortable homelands
To the opulent court of a tyrant
To the humble cradle of a Child
And who is revealed, by their beguiling gifts
To be a king worthy of gold
A divinity worthy of worshipping with incense
And a healing sacrifice, worthy of myrrh's balm.
Few feasts of the church celebrate a stranger story.
And perhaps it's the case that we need a strange story to meet the strangeness of the times,
To, in the midst of difficulty, or challenge,
And especially in the midst of the numbing drumbeat of horrors that so often is the daily news,
We need this strange story to reacquaint us with a deep down wonder
That is far deeper than the times;
Because the real strangeness of it all isn't so much in the details of the narrative
Odd though they may be
The real strangeness of the story
Lies in the unexpected ways
Grace tends to reveal itself
In the lives of human beings
The lives of poor ornery people like you and like I.

In our readings this morning,
there are four instances of grace doing strange and unexpected things:
In the lives of the exiles of Judah
In the life of Saint Paul

In the life of Herod
In the lives of the Magi.

In Isaiah, the prophet announces to the people of Judah
something that would have seemed absurd to many of them.
They're returning to Jerusalem after decades in exile
Discovering there a city still in ruins
Not one stone left upon another
The temple still demolished
The wounds of exile newly re-opened,
The familiar painfully estranged by devastation and neglect
And here is the prophet saying:
Look at this mess.
This wasted city you loved and used to call home
Desolate.
Do you see it?
Now look closer.
And prepare to be surprised.
God is going to do something amazing with your shattered hopes and dreams
God is going to send brightness into that darkness
God is going to lift up this desolation and make of it a place of such abundance and wonder
That the nations will stream to it in awe,
Those you thought lost will stream to it in awe
And everyone everyone everyone will find their home, their joy their bliss: here
Because light is dawning: here
Where you are
And you will shine brighter than you ever thought you could
So stand up: arise!
Your despair is not the end of this story
Stand up
Your darkness is about to end
Stand up
We've a City, a community to build
To bear God's fire to the world.

Out of the ashes, out of dead ends, dead cities, dead dreams and exile
Grace unexpectedly brings forth hope and breathes new life.
–What in you aches for new life, for hope's revival or return?
Stand up. Lift up your eyes. Your light is coming.

In Ephesians, Paul talks about his mission to the Gentiles
And it's clear that the idea that God would accept the Gentiles into the family of God
Is still an amazingly strange idea that still strikes Paul with wonder
He calls it a mystery
Who could have guessed that God was that gracious?
That God desired all people to be part of God's household
That God loved all people

That grace was for all people.
It's stunning
It's life changing
None of the old categories and divisions make sense
Grace unexpectedly finds a way to destroy division
To make every "them" an "us", of every "you" a "we"
–Who might we imagine to be on the outside, to be the them, the other?
Stand up. Lift up your eyes.
Prepare for dawning of the light
By which you will see the mystery of love at work in all people.

Herod too receives the light of grace
By the testimony of the Magi
And he refuses to receive it.
He's oriented toward his own worldly power, his own kingdom
And the idea that there's another king suddenly on the scene
Is deeply troubling to him
He thinks he has a rival in the newborn Jesus
That the King of Kings, Lord of all the Worlds envies Herod's tiny throne
That the Eternal One craves a temporal kingdom.
In the dawning light, he sees his end, and he cannot recognize in it
The end of all and anything in him opposed to love
The end of death in him
The beginning in him of a new life of love
And he clings more tightly to his throne, to his power
The brightness of which is like the eerie phosphorescent lure
Of some needle-toothed monstrosity from the ocean's dark and ancient depths:
He makes his choice for that monstrosity
For the deadly glow of Empire.
He will seek to kill Jesus
But in that, he will prove himself just the first of us
Who will all one day shout "crucify him"
When we behold the King of Love in purple rags
Thorn-crowned, pain-wracked and broken.
But even then,
This one, who, in has audacious love for us,
Entrusted himself to our feeble care as a feeble infant
Submitted himself to our parodies of justice
And fruitlessly appealed to our compassion from the terrible tree on which he hung
Even then, Our Lord will not lift a finger to wrest from us our misapprehended power of death
Not until he submits himself in love, completely, to death
In order to undo it, completely, from the inside
And rise from the dead to offer us poor murderous children of wrath,
The fullness of his forgiveness, his love, his own divine life.
–On what deadlinesses are we still fastened?
By what powers of sin and death are we still ensorcelled or enthralled?
Stand up. Lift up your eyes.

Prepare for the light of God to dispossess you of the death to which you cling
And make you an inheritor of a Life too vast to possess
A Life that will, in fact, possess you and shine through you
With an incomprehensible brightness of joy.

And finally, we come to the revelation of grace to the Magi.
We know little of their story, little of their real identity
But given the name of Magi, they were likely Magian priests of the Zoroastrian religion
Who likely kindled and tended the sacred fires of that religion and offered sacrifices as well.
Whoever and whatever they were, though,
They were foreigners, outsiders, the gentile other.
But they saw the light of a distant star
And they followed it.
Think of that for a moment.
In the course of their everyday lives, the course of their duties,
In the midst of a usual night's usual darkness
They saw a strange little unexpected pinprick of light.
I don't imagine it was as huge or significant-looking as so many images portray it
But its bigness is less important than this: it was new
And however bright, the Magi saw it, noticed it,
And understood it to herald something, a new something:
They wanted to know what it meant
And they oriented themselves to it—which is to say, they didn't just follow it
They allowed the light to change them
They made room in their lives for this little pinprick of newness
In the hope that it would one day blaze up in them and transfigure them.
They came to Jerusalem, expecting to discover a newborn king a newborn something
In the capital city of Judea where naturally such a king would be born.
Imagine how perplexed they were in the midst of Herod's palace
To discover that the new thing they sought wasn't there after all
That fear reigned in the palace
That the good news of a new king was met with suspicion rather than wonder
Imagine how disappointed they might have felt:
That perhaps the light had uprooted them and enticed them
And sent them on a fool's errand after all...
But they remained oriented
They followed the light to a poor hovel at which, our gospel says,
They were overwhelmed with joy
I would like to think for two reasons:
Their journey had ended, yes, having found that for which they sought;
But I think, too, their apprenticeship to the light
Their habit of following the light
Learning the way of the light
Walking its path
Had accustomed them to setting aside their own expectations
Preferring the Light's way to theirs
And I think their joy flowed from their wonder at the depth of the Light's wisdom:

That here, no fear-plagued palace
But a very humble dwelling
A simple house
Here was something new indeed
Here was the revelation of the grace that lifts up the lowly
That scatters the proud
That feeds the hungry
That welcomes the stranger
That defends the poor and the widow
That overturns the world and topples empires
Here was the God who longs for people so deeply that he became human
In order to draw them more closely into his own divine heart
Here was the fullness of the transfiguring light to which they sought to give themselves
Here was an overwhelming fullness of joy
Here, enthroned in the Seat of Wisdom, the lap of his Mother,
Was not just the king of one people
But the King of every heart
Demanding no homage by force or 'suasion
But compelling worship by little more than the giddy goodness of his smile
By the depthless oceans of love spilling out in laughing happy tears
To see his friends, his family,
Newly arrived at their journey's end, newly arrived at their life's beginning,
And knowing themselves, in Christ, through Christ, for the first time
As the friends, the family of God.

Where might new pinpricks of light appear in the midst of our night skies?
Are we noticing? Are we ready to be oriented to the brightness of God's dawning?
Are we ready to be given to and transfigured by the light of love, the light of Jesus Christ?
Are we ready to leave our comfortable places
For the sake of the mystery of love into which God desires to transform us?
Stand up. Lift up your eyes. Even now the breaking light is calling you away from fear,
Away from death, and into its own heart of wonder and of joy.
Beloved, your light is coming
From places you thought dead and hopeless
Your light is coming
From unexpected places and people
Your joy is coming
From pinpricks of light new shining in the darkness
Your light, your joy is coming...
So stand up. Lift up your eyes.
Lift up your hearts
The Sun of Righteousness
Desires to dawn from the depths of your own life
The strange grace of God desires to reveal itself in you.
Will you receive it?
Will you be transfigured by love and overwhelmed by joy?
Will you follow the Daystar to Love's simple home,

All the way to the depths of your being, the ground of your soul?
Will you shine with love's redeeming grace in the midst of this world's present darkness?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
