

Isaiah 60:1-6

- ¹ 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 his 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.

Matthew 2:1-12

- ¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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.'"

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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." ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON

A few of you might have heard already that I tried to burn down the chapel a few weeks ago at our longest night service. I promise it wasn't purposeful, as much as my Christmas Eve sermon might have made you all think I condone arson...but I digress. For those of you who don't know, we lit candles on the Longest Night and placed them, safely I thought, in sand, in a plastic liner, inside a wooden window box. We've done this plenty of times, so obviously I assumed it was safe. We finished worship and went off to drink our coffee. A few minutes later I decided to sneak back into the chapel and take a few photos, for posterity and social media, and it's a good thing I did, because those candles had burned down, melted the thick plastic liner, and set the interior of the wooden box on fire. Judi Monson came to my rescue with some water, the smelly, burning plastic box was set outside, and fans were procured to clear the chapel of smoke. All in all, it's probably the best way we could have learned that there aren't smoke alarms in the chapel space. See? I did us all a favor!

This story can be somewhat funny because it didn't end in disaster, nary a mark on the communion table, and only an apparently dangerous window box was harmed. Stories of churches and fire don't often end this way. I posted about this to my clergy group online, and I received numerous stories of churches and fires that ended in tragedy. Buildings lost, beloved paraments made by long dead church members ruined, even a few light injuries along the way. Enough tragedy to encourage me to order fire blankets for the pulpits and put "install smoke alarm in chapel" on the Facilities to do list.

But we'll still use candles, because we're a church, and candles are as much a part of warp and weft as the pages of the hymnal, coffee and cookies, endless committee meetings, and questions about who's really in charge of cleaning the refrigerator. Candles are central to Christian worship, and for good reason. They're beautiful, to be sure, but they're also incredibly metaphorical and poetic.

Everytime I visit a Catholic church, as a worshipper or as a tourist, I pop over to the side chapel to light a candle or two, sending up little prayers with their light. I look around at all the other candles flickering, at those which have burned out but still smoke, at those long gone dark and cold...and I wonder about the prayers offered by others, and I send a prayer alongside their flames as well.

On Christmas Eve, I love the tradition of passing the light, seeing the sanctuary go from near darkness to a warm, orange light, each person's face alight with the sign of the light of

the world, shared and spread among us. And it brings me delight to hear the kids cracking and shaking their glow sticks, and putting them into the little plastic holders, just like the adults.

I forget, every year, how slow and deliberate and really bright the gathering of the light over the 4 weeks of Advent really is. The difference between 1 and 5 candles never feels like much at the beginning, but by the end I'm proven wrong again.

And then there's Maundy Thursday. That gathering when we come into a space lit warmly with lights and candles, where we share a meal around the table, when we remember the betrayal, the trial, the torture, and the tomb. And we put out the lights, bit by bit, one by one. Until we're left in darkness. And it honestly makes me feel like maybe the light won't come back this time. There's despair without the light.

This year, I'm going to celebrate Easter Vigil with some dear friends, which isn't part of our tradition here. But it's a service that takes place on Saturday night, leading into Easter morning. It starts in darkness, and one by one, candles are set ablaze by the Paschal Christ candle. New members are baptized and welcomed into the light and the water. This year, John and I will hold our candles and promise to show the love of Christ, to teach and care for a sweet little boy born to our friends, and our candles will light the water as Wendel is welcomed into the family of faith.

For all their danger, for all the potential tragedy, candles are totally worth it. They are the unsung hero of our liturgical practice. They are the metaphor which shapes our church year. They tangibly remind us of the ebb and flow of our story—of God brought near, of God abandoned, of God ablaze among us. They carry our prayers to heaven. They light our path, literally and figuratively. No, despite my recent brush with fire, we won't be getting rid of candles any time soon.

By this point, I assume you all are nodding off a little, your minds wandering, thinking, "why is she waxing poetic about candles?" (See what I did there?) So here you go—here's the crux: Epiphany is our celebration of the light. The growing light of Advent, the light of the world come during Christmastide, it all culminates in this day—Epiphany, the festival of light. The magi followed a star, the light of the world was found with his parents, the people who walked in darkness, on them a light has shined. The Glory of the Lord has risen, and the light is at the highest peak. The light has won out over the darkness, and while the darkness will once again build, culminating in that dark day of Good Friday, right now, we are in the light.

And this feast, Epiphany, it's not frivolous. It's not something we should brush off with a nod toward the magi, a cute pageant, and a couple of tired hymns. Epiphany is revolutionary, because it is the story which says—the light has come, and it is here to stay.

And Epiphany tells us what our response to the light can be. The Magi, when they have followed and found the light, the Christ child, they worship, they bring gifts, they pay

homage, they are in awe. They delight in the great gift of light given for all the world. And then they go home by another way...because there is another way the light is received.

King Herod. And while he's often portrayed as a cartoon, a buffoon, a silly, insecure king. He's actually terrifying if we read him properly. He's sly and slick, and like most tyrants he's self-centered, self-promoting, and fundamentally insecure with himself or his place in the world. So much so that he lashes out against even the whisper of a new king, still a child, a harmless toddler with no power. He hears the faintest little tweet, a single, insignificant threat to his place in the world, and he responds with fury untold. He slaughters every child in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Can you imagine? Whether it historically happened or not, this is a horrifying portrait of a tantruming, but all powerful, tyrannical leader. To slaughter the innocent, on the outside chance one of them might be a king you once heard a whisper about.

That too is a response to the light. To lash out in violence because the light of the world challenges a position of power and privilege.

So, no. Epiphany is not a throwaway Sunday on our calendar. It's a challenging story and a necessary reminder of what our response should be when the light comes in our midst—will we worship or will we react as if threatened?

There was once this great Catholic thinker and writer of the 14th c. Catherine of Siena. A lot of her writing still exist, so she's often read and studied. Her most famous quote is probably the following: "Be who God created you to be, and you will set the world ablaze." Which is a quote too often ripped from her texts for a self help lecture or a nice mug quote. It's great, but it's sort of fluffy and self motivated if you don't know the rest of her writings. Like, great, I'll just do me, that sounds good. But Catherine wrote a lot about fire and setting things ablaze and what it means to be created by God. And this quote, great as it is for a mug, is better when we've read her others works. Like this bit, about Communion, written in the Dialogues from the perspective of God:

"Imagine that many people brought candles. Each candle, from the smallest as well as the largest, would have the whole light...This is how it is with those who receive the sacrament. Each one of you brings your own candle [or on Epiphany, we might say Gold, Frankincense, or Myrrh], that is, the holy desire with which you receive the sacrament. Your candle is unlit and it is lighted when you receive the sacrament. It is I who have given you the candle with which you can receive the light and nourish it within you. Your candle is love, because it is for love that I created you. Without love, you cannot have life."¹

It's a little less self-helpy, right? If we see our little candle, our holy devotion as love, love which we were created for, love which is lit up in the sacrament, where we are sent out to set the world ablaze. That is the story of Epiphany, the right response to the star in the sky,

¹ Dialogue 110, Trans. Suzanne Noffke, "Catherine of Siena, The Dialogue. (1980) pp. 206-9.

the light of the world, the glory of the Lord risen around us. So come, let us share at this holy table together, let us light our candles, and be sent out to alight the world with love.