

SERMON FOR JANUARY 5, 2013

The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i
United Church of Christ

7:45 & 10:30 Worship Services

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

Message: **"Seeing Signs of GOD's New Life
Born Among Us!"**

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Gathering in the Word

Our English word, **Epiphany**, comes from the **Greek** *epiphaneia*, which means “**appearing**” or “**revealing**,” “**manifestation**,” and “**new understanding**.” *When the Magi looked at that wrinkled little babe, they received a new understanding of the way in which God is at work in the world.*

Epiphany teaches us that GOD is with us in the humble and the great; the obvious and the unexpected; the neighbor and the stranger, and the church goer and persons of other faiths as well as seekers.

Epiphany “sets the stage for us” for GOD’s expansive spirit!

Epiphany affirms to us that GOD’s revelation is both global and local—within the Jewish tradition and throughout Creation!

Hearing the Word

Isaiah 60:1-6 (The VOICE Bible)

Once again the scene shifts. The exile is receding in the past and the remnant of Israel—those who survived God’s judgment and Babylon’s cruelty—are back home working hard to rebuild their lives and communities. But life back in Jerusalem under Persian rule is not faring as well as they hoped. So once again a prophetic voice breaks the silence to address a discouraged population. Most people are facing terrific difficulties. Despite what

their prophets have spoken, Jerusalem is a mere shadow of the great city their parents and grandparents knew. People doubt whether God is really alive, or really all that powerful, or really even cares. But the faithful know that God is powerful and does care; they are determined to convince their countrymen that God has their well-being in mind and that God can make his people and this place great again, if they just trust and follow Him. Soon the whole world will be caught up in this brand new thing God is doing. This section of Isaiah is written to a singular female as if she is the mother of the Jews. But this woman isn't just any woman—she is Jerusalem. Cities are often described as female because they are like mothers supporting a brood of children (the population). This capital city of God's special favor, of God's presence, is filled with God's people of the promise and is poised to become something new and glorious.

60 Arise, shine, for your light has broken through!

The Eternal One's brilliance has dawned upon you.

² *See truly; look carefully—darkness blankets the earth; people all over are cloaked in darkness. But God will rise and shine on you; the Eternal's bright glory will shine on you, a light for all to see.*

³ *Nations north and south, peoples east and west, will be drawn to your light, will find purpose and direction by your light. In the radiance of your rising, you will enlighten the leaders of nations.*

⁴ *Don't be shy; don't be doubtful; lift up your eyes and look around. They have gathered all around you, eager to come and be close to you. And your children will come back to this land: your sons from the farthest places of*

wandering, and your daughters gently carried *home*.

⁵ And when you see it, your face will glow; your heart will race and be filled with joy; For *great* ships will arrive with gifts from across the sea, and the wealth of nations will make their way to you.

⁶ Herd after herd of camels will cover the land, *caravans* arriving *daily* from *south and southwest*: Midian, Ephah, and Even Sheba with gifts of gold and frankincense. They will announce *for all the world to hear*, "The Eternal be praised!"

The Prophet Isaiah speaks of divine radiance emerging in a challenging time. After a period of darkness—GOD's **Light** is coming!

- ✓ Isaiah says we need to get off our feet!
- ✓ We need to greet GOD's **Light** actively—grace leads to action; and revelation leads to movement!

Isaiah is clear and clear as can be: The long-awaited Messiah will be bathed in a radiant, holy, shining **Light**—Pure Radiant **Light!** It is because the LORD GOD YAHWEH shines on Israel that they too will likewise shine!

So in verse 60:1, Isaiah says, "Arise, shine!" Isaiah also says later that other nations will be drawn "to the brightness of *your* shining."

- ✓ It's ultimately YAHWEH GOD who shines upon his people!
- ✓ YAHWEH will be your everlasting **Light!**"
- ✓ YAHWEH's original **Light** is SO intense, SO radiant, SO holy, and SO good—even if we just reflect that

Light—so that we are caught up in that powerful **Light** that we cannot reflect that **Light** without simultaneously being caught up in it and even being **transformed** by that **Light**!

- ✓ That **Holy Light** was also going to attract far more than just folks who looked and acted and thought just like the rest of Israel. **YAHWEH's Light** was going to attract all kinds of people all over the world!

Matthew 2:1-12 (The VOICE Bible)

Mary and Joseph name their baby Jesus, but sometimes He is referred to as Immanuel (“with us is GOD”), because by coming to dwell with us, living and dying among us, He would be able to save us from our sin.

2 Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, in the province of Judea, at the time when King Herod reigned. *Not long after Jesus was born, **magi**, wise men or seers from the East, made their way from the East to Jerusalem. These wise men made inquiries.*

These men from the East come looking for the One who has been born who will save His people from sin.

Wise Men: ² Where is this newborn, who is the King of the Jews? When we were far away in the East we saw His star, and we have followed its glisten and gleam all this way to worship Him.

³ King Herod began to hear rumors of the wise men's quest, and he, and all of his followers in Jerusalem, were worried. ⁴ So Herod called all of the leading Jewish teachers, the chief priests and head scribes, and he

asked them where *Hebrew tradition claimed* the long-awaited Anointed One would be born.

Scribes and Priests: ⁵ *an ancient Hebrew prophet, Micah,* said this:

⁶ But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are no poor relation—
For from your people will come a Ruler
who will be the shepherd of My people Israel.

From that prophecy we learn that the Savior would be born in the town of Bethlehem, in the province of Judea. This information in hand, Herod orders the wise men to come to his chambers in secret; and when they arrive, Herod quizzes them.

⁷ Herod called the wise men to him, demanding to know the exact time the special star had appeared to them.

⁸ Then Herod sent them to Bethlehem.

Herod: *Go to Bethlehem* and search high and low for this *Savior* child; and as soon as you know where He is, report it to me so that I may go and worship Him.

⁹⁻¹⁰ The wise men left Herod's *chambers* and went on their way. The star they had first seen in the East reappeared—a *miracle that, of course,* overjoyed and enraptured the wise men. The star led them to the house where Jesus lay; ¹¹ and as soon as the wise men arrived, they saw Him with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. They unpacked their satchels and gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These are exceptionally good gifts, for gold is what is given a king, and Jesus is the King of kings; incense is what you expect to be given a priest, and Jesus is the High Priest of all high priests; myrrh ointment is used to heal, and Jesus is a healer. But myrrh is also used to embalm corpses—and Jesus was born to die.

¹² And then, *just as Joseph did a few months before*, the wise men had a dream warning them not to go back to Herod. *The wise men heeded the dream. Ignoring Herod's instructions*, they returned to their homes in the East by a different route.

The story of the Magi:

- ✓ They were foreigners—possibly from what is now Iran; some have even guessed—one from China! Bible doesn't say how many magi there were!
- ✓ The Jewish leaders closed their hearts to the Magi.
- ✓ The Magi are guided by a Star!
- ✓ GOD speaks through the Magi through dreams—God speaks through the unconscious as well as the conscious mind!
- ✓ Finally—the Magi left for their own country by another route.

The Church has always tried to distinguish itself from the world around it. But once that unspoken expectation calcifies and hardens for a generation or three or a hundred—the Church morphs into a Church with an unspoken goal of keeping out those who would upset the tidy world inside the church—*the strange, the different, the odd, the exotic types of folks become not so much*

unwelcomed in the Church as they become just not with the scope of consideration. Soon—they just don't fit in!

Why—such different folks—the swarthy and dark ones, the poorly dressed, the tattooed, the foreign born—probably would not even want to be in our congregation because after all—what's the point?

- ✓ With whom could they ever have a meaningful conversation at the church luncheon?
- ✓ And surely our organ music, our hymns and our liturgy would not be their cup of tea.
- ✓ Surely it would be better if they formed their own church with their own kind and such and such!

Often we Church people become myopic (narrow-minded, prejudiced, intolerant) in our view of what the Church is or what the Church should be, could be, or might be someday.

Matthew will have not of this!

So Matthew opens his Gospel with the family tree of Jesus: There are 4 foreign-born women (3 with questionable pasts) in Jesus' genealogy—reminding his mostly Jewish readers that the family that produced the Messiah had itself been far more diverse than most people want to admit—and had “plenty of skeletons” in the family closet!

Matthew had been hinting all long that GOD was up to something much bigger than saving a whole bunch of people who looked and acted and thought alike! So then Matthew introduces us to “**IMMANUEL**,” to GOD-with-

us"! So if "**IMMANUEL**" means "GOD-with-us," then just who is the "us" part?

So Matthew introduces us to a group (don't know how many) of astrologers from Bagdad whose pseudo-science and quasi-religion was overtly condemned by Scripture! The Magi were spiritually lost and religiously detestable.

Yet here they are in Matthew's Gospel. There they are as an apparently welcome presence at the bedside of the **SON OF GOD**, of **IMMANUEL**!

The Magi were being **included** in the "us" of "GOD with us" as were Tamar (*Genesis 38*), Rahab (*Joshua 2:1-21; 6:17, 22, 23, 25*), Ruth (*Book of Ruth*), and Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11*) in Jesus' Family Tree!

We're not told what happened to the Magi after they left—they probably went back to Persia or wherever they came from.

Matthew's message is always that IMMANUEL will always be "with them" forever even though that would mean that he's stay "with them" while they spread out into the world to baptize and make disciples of ALL nations!

Doing the Word

So what is the Word of God for us on this Epiphany Sunday?

1.ONE: SHINE GOD'S LIGHT!

- ✓ We are the shine the **LIGHT** of Jesus! Not our light or TFCCCH's light.
- ✓ We are a 'lighthouse' where people can see GOD's light coming from all of us!
- ✓ **Go share the Light—be Jesus' Light to others!**

Song by Cathy Pino

You are the light of the world

You are the light of the world

So shine, shine, shine where you are

You are the light of the world

2.TWO: LOOK FOR WILD DIVERSITY IN OUR CHURCH – Not "button-down uniformity" in the Church.

- ✓ Who are the strange around us – anybody in worship this morning?
- ✓ Who can you invite to worship next Sunday when Pastor Jonathan Cheng preaches on our joint worship as we install our Board members for 2014?
- ✓ We are historically a Chinese-Christian Church—open to all!
- ✓ Invite your family and friends and bring them to church!

3.THREE: EXPECT SURPRISES AND BARRIERS!

See the unpredictable as the only inevitability worth talking about! With GOD . . .

- ✓ Expect barriers and dividing walls to be breached and eradicated!

- ✓ Expect former foes and enemies to become sisters and brothers!
- ✓ Expect those you once shunned, avoided, rejected, ignored—to become cherished friends and family!
- ✓ The more routine and uniform we are as a Church—the more we need Matthew 2 to shake us up!

Sent in the Word- *Story – The Christmas Scout*

In spite of the fun and laughter, 13-year-old Frank Wilson was not happy. It was true he had received all the presents he wanted. And he enjoyed the traditional Christmas Eve reunions with relatives for the purpose of exchanging gifts and good wishes. But, Frank was not happy because this was his first Christmas without his brother, Steve, who during the year, had been killed by a reckless driver.

Frank missed his brother and the close companionship they had together. Frank said good-bye to his relatives and explained to his parents that he was leaving a little early to see a friend; and from there he could walk home. Since it was cold outside, Frank put on his new plaid jacket. It was his FAVORITE gift. He placed the other presents on his new sled. Then Frank headed out, hoping to find the patrol leader of his Boy Scout troop. Frank always felt understood by him. Though rich in wisdom, he lived in the Flats, the section of town where most of the poor lived, and his patrol leader did odd jobs to help support his family.

To Frank's disappointment, his friend was not at home. As Frank hiked down the street toward home, he caught glimpses of trees and decorations in many of the small houses. Then, through one front window, he glimpsed a shabby room with limp stockings hanging over an empty fireplace. A woman was seated nearby . . . weeping. The stockings reminded him of the way he and his brother had always hung theirs side by side. The next morning, they would be bursting with presents.

A sudden thought struck Frank -- he had not done his "good deed" for the day. Before the impulse passed, he knocked on the door. "Yes?" the sad voice of the woman asked. "May I come in?" asked Frank. "You are very welcome," she said, seeing his sled full of gifts, and assuming he was making a collection, "but I have no food or gifts for you. I have nothing for my own children."

"That's not why I am here," Frank replied. "Please choose whatever presents you would like for your children from the sled."

"Why, God bless you!" the amazed woman answered gratefully. She selected some candies, a game, the toy airplane and a puzzle. When she took the Scout flashlight, Frank almost cried out. Finally, the stockings were full.

"Won't you tell me your name?" she asked, as Frank was leaving.

"Just call me the Christmas Scout," he replied.

The visit left Frank touched, and with an unexpected flicker of joy in his heart. He understood that his sorrow was not the only sorrow in the world. Before he left the Flats, he had given away the remainder of his gifts. The plaid jacket had gone to a shivering boy.

Now Frank trudged homeward, cold and uneasy. How could he explain to his parents that he had given his presents away? "Where are your presents, son?" asked his father as Frank entered the house.

Frank answered, "I gave them away."

"The airplane from Aunt Susan? Your coat from Grandma? Your flashlight? We thought you were happy with your gifts."

"I was -- very happy," the boy answered quietly.

"But Frank, how could you be so impulsive?" his mother asked. "How will we explain to the relatives who spent so much time and gave so much love shopping for you?"

His father was firm. "You made your choice, Frank. We cannot afford any more presents."

With his brother gone, and his family disappointed in him, Frank suddenly felt dreadfully alone. He had not expected a reward for his generosity; for he

knew that a good deed always should be its own reward. It would be tarnished otherwise. So he did not want his gifts back; however he wondered if he would ever again truly recapture joy in his life. He thought he had this evening, but it had been fleeting. Frank thought of his brother, and sobbed himself to sleep.

The next morning, he came downstairs to find his parents listening to Christmas music on the radio. Then the announcer spoke: "Merry Christmas, everybody! The nicest Christmas story we have this morning comes from the Flats. A crippled boy down there has a new sled this morning, another youngster has a fine plaid jacket, and several families report that their children were made happy last night by gifts from a teenage boy who simply called himself the Christmas Scout. No one could identify him, but the children of the Flats claim that the Christmas Scout was a personal representative of old Santa Claus himself."

Frank felt his father's arms go around his shoulders, and he saw his mother smiling through her tears. "Why didn't you tell us? We didn't understand. We are so proud of you, son." The carols came over the air again filling the room with music: ". . . Praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on Earth."

~ **You** Are the LIGHT of the world!"