

St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor
Order of Worship for the Second Sunday of Christmas
An Epiphany Celebration
January 3, 2021

(As our congregation returns to holding worship in our building, we are conscious of the many people who will not be able to be physically present. Therefore, we will be continuing the practice of sending a worship bulletin to all who are on our mailing lists for email or hard copy. Those who will be worshipping from home and who have computer access will also be receiving a recorded version of the service that will be sent out on Sunday afternoon. We welcome your participation in any way that is convenient for you, and we encourage you to share our worship service with any person you know who may appreciate receiving it.)

Morning Announcements and Prayer Requests

Prelude (recording begins)

Morning Praise and Call to Worship: Isaiah 60:1-9

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 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. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 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. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you. 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. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because God has glorified you.

Hymn

The First Noel

***The first Noel, the angel did say, was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
in fields where they lay keeping their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep.***

Refrain: Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the king of Israel.

*They look-ed up and saw a star shining in the east. Beyond them far,
and to the earth it gave great light, and so it continued both day and night. Ref.*

*And by the light of that same star three wise men came from country far,
to seek for a king was their intent, and to follow the star wherever it went. Ref.*

*This star drew nigh to the northwest, o'er Bethlehem it took it's rest,
and there it did both stop and stay, right over the place where Jesus lay. Ref.*

*Then entered in those wise men three, full reverently upon their knee,
and offered there in his presence their gold, and myrrh and frankincense. Ref.*

*Then let us all with one accord sing praises to our heavenly Lord,
who hath made heaven and earth of naught and with is blood our life hath
bought. Ref.*

Prayer for Epiphany (in unison):

God who illuminates our darkest hours, as the ancient magi were led by a glorious star to worship the holy infancy of the One who reveals your heart, may we who are gathered here also follow your light, so that we may live in the grace and peace of your presence forevermore. Amen.

Hymn

Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our darkness and come to our aid.

Star of the east, the horizon adorning, guide where the infant redeemer is laid.

What shall we give him in costly devotion? Shall we bring incense and offerings divine,

Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean, myrrh from the forest or gold from the mine?

*Vainly we offer each lavish oblation, vainly with gifts would his favor secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration, dearer to God are the prayers of the poor*

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our darkness and come to our aid.

Star of the east, the horizon adorning, guide where our infant redeemer is laid!

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet, "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." Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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."

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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Hymn

We Three Kings

***We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.***

***Refrain: O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.***

***Born a king on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign. Ref.***

***Frankincense to offer have I, incense owns a deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, voices raising, worshiping God on high. Ref.***

***Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in a stone cold tomb. Ref.***

***Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia! Sounds through the earth and skies. Ref.***

Sermon

Among the four Gospel writers in our Bible, Matthew may be the most mystical. As we read his story, we become conscious that we are being swept up in the great historical mystery that is the core of our Christian faith. Everything is connected, as Matthew tells it. Nothing happens by accident, and the most seemingly minor events are somehow related to things that have happened before; so events both ordinary and extraordinary gain significance, because they are associated with memories from the distant past or anticipations of events to come. Later on in the story, Matthew will share with his readers what Jesus taught and did during his earthly life; but, in the opening chapters of the Gospel, he just wants to show us his vision of God touching earth to heaven in the birth of the holy child.

The story of the magi is a wonder story that only Matthew tells, and he tells it in his own way. It's best not to get caught up too much in historical details and scientific explanations, like pinpointing what astronomical event this really was, or asking if there were really just three magi, or questioning the precise date of the Roman census. These are all sensible questions, but finding answers to them won't really help us unlock the meaning of the story, because the meaning of the story lies entirely in the mystery it reveals: that in some entirely incomprehensible way, the truth of God's compassion for the entire world became clear in the moment when a child was born, and people who needed to find God found God in the child. These star-struck pilgrims from the east became the messengers of a spiritual truth that God may be discovered in the tenderness we feel for a child's fragility – or perhaps the fragility of us all.

In a world of authoritarian power, it is the magi's' lot to move between the dangerous forces that would destroy this child who was born to lead people away from the culture of violence and oppression represented by Rome. They dodge their obligation to report to treacherous King Herod by returning home by another way. They bear gifts that would be appropriate to give in tribute to a powerful ruler, but they offer them to the child instead. Their behavior is a foretelling of the lessons Jesus will later teach, when he contrasts the gospel of Roman peace through victory and conquest with the Gospel of peace through building a community of care for those most vulnerable among us.

How truly wise these magi were. It may have been sensible enough in those ancient days to believe in the sign of a bright and most peculiar star. Such things were often seen as portents of kingly births. But when they saw this child in his rude surroundings, and with none of the trappings of worldly authority, the miracle is that they still believed; and they protected him, as he would someday call upon us all to protect one another, as those who know that each of us matters to God.

Musical Interlude

Jake Rizer

Our Time of Prayer

Spirit of life made manifest in Jesus, we gather today in your presence at the beginning of a new year. We have come, like the magi of the ancient world, because we have seen the light of Christ, and we pray that it may guide us into the holy day of peace. May there be among us a spirit of the New Creation, so that we may find ourselves revived again for the work of ministry that we are called to do.

We lift up before you those in our membership and in our families and among our friends who have special needs for your presence today – those who are ill, those recovering from surgery or illness, those feeling the loneliness that these dark days can bring, those living in fear or depression and those who are courageous in the face of challenges.

May we, who have heard the Gospel of Jesus and experienced the sensation of knowing that we are welcomed and beloved in your community of grace, find opportunities to show the love of Christ to all those we meet. May our resolutions for the coming year be rooted in our trust for you and our desire to be faithful to the compassionate wisdom of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And now let us pray as he has taught us:

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

Closing Hymn

As with Gladness

*As with gladness mean of old did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious Lord, may we evermore your splendor see.*

*As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before him whom heaven and earth adore,
So may we with willing feet ever seek the mercy seat.*

*As they offered gifts most rare at that manger rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ to you, our heavenly king.*

*Holy Jesus, every day keep us in the narrow way;
And when earthly things are past, bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide, where no clouds thy glory hide.*

Benediction

*Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of
the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

Postlude