

Listen to these words today, from within our scripture.

“The whole world will come riding on camels and bringing gifts.

Gifts of gold and frankincense. And they will bow down and worship God’s light.”

What do these words remind you of?

These mentions of men coming from the east bearing gifts of gold and incense, proclaiming the praise of the Lord. It reminds us of the Wise Men’s epiphany as they travelled from afar to worship Christ the King.

But our scripture today is from Isaiah and was written long before Christ’s arrival on earth. For Israel in Isaiah a different hint of hope was revealing itself on a new horizon.

At the time this scripture was written the people of God had been living in great darkness. They had been put out, relocated...there was no room for them in Jerusalem. As foreign invaders overtook their homeland and they were exiled... loss, fear, terror, abandonment and thick darkness hung over them.

So words like the Prophet Israel proclaimed would have been shocking: “Arise, shine, your light has come and all nations will come to you to see such a light.”

A light? A light? No dear, God, we have been living in darkness.

Your light has been hidden from us for too long, and we have had to satisfy ourselves with the bread of adversity and the water of affliction.

But here is what Isaiah saw in the midst of darkness.

He saw hope, for a new year had come. His people were returning home.

There is truth in what Isaiah prophesized.

Both in those years of darkness and in the darkness of the night Christ was born.

Isaiah saw his people returning home, returning to Jerusalem.

The Persian King Cyrus, former invader, allowed the people of Israel to return to their homeland. Cyrus returned what he had taken from the Temple and even sent these gifts of gold, silver and supplies to rebuild what he had broken.

These were the riches of the nations being brought to Israel,

the herds of camels, the flocks of Kedar, the gold and silver of Seba

being brought to rebuild. For the first time in their lives Israel was receiving treasure instead of paying taxes. This was the first sign of hope the Hebrews had seen in many years.

There was once a church who had a long and proud history in their community.

They had potlucks, and pitchins, and fall festivals, but they had no children. At one time their Sunday School had been filled with children and youth, but those little ones

had grown up into bigger men and women and were now making their own way in the world. The Church wondered what would happen?

One day one of those little ones, now a full grown women came back and she had with her a little girl.

A little child who's whispers, and wonder, and girly giggles in worship was like a star twinkling in what had felt dark and distant.

The day Winnie was baptized she was three years old.

The day Kristen was baptized she was 30 years old.

And I remember that baptism because it was something shining in a season of darkness.

Even for Kristen, she had struggled with depression and single motherhood.

For her the church was like the light she needed, in the midst of darkness.

Christmas celebrates the child of light who Isaiah dreamed was coming, who the magi traveled far to see. Christ took on the darkness so we could see the light just as Isaiah said, "Arise, and shine, for your light has come." Just as with the Israelites, Christ's light is the promise that tickles our souls and reveals the way of hope.

Isaiah 30:21 tells us, Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

This is the way Christ leads us. Our Lord warned us about the paths that lie ever ahead of us in the Gospel of Matthew.

One is a narrow gate, that few may find, this is the narrow road that leads us to life.

Imagine those narrow places that lead to life,

the narrow gate that leads into the holy of holies in Jerusalem's temple,

the well known turns of your hometown,

the reassurance of your closest and most lifegiving relationships gathered on either side to center and support you,

the shepherds gate Jesus' welcomes us into as one of His flock.

These are narrow and lifegiving places.

Jesus says there is also a gate that is wide and road that is broad, many may enter it and find destruction and ruin.

In Israel, the widest roads were the most unsafe.

There was always the threat of being robbed or ambushed.

These wide and broad places allowed people to hide their intentions,

to take advantage of others and to remain unrooted and irresponsible to anyone.

We live in a society of broadness where too much is allowed.

And less are listening to that voice saying, "this is the way to life, walk in it."

This is the word Christ brought to us.

Christ knew the scriptures of old, of Isaiah, of David and Moses.

He knew the path he would walk would be narrow and no one could travel it but him, but it was the narrow path he would take for our salvation.

Dear Lord, whether we turn to the right or to the left,
may we have ears to hear your voice guiding us, saying,
“this is the way, the way to life.”

As we come into this New Year, we have prayed for our Church and for our Leaders.
There is a way God is leading our Church. There is a way God is leading you.

And in our worship today I want to take time to formally lift up the vision and intention we have for this New Year as a Church.

If you look on the yellow insert in your bulletin our church focusing on 7 goals this year. These goals were inspired by God, by you and by the community and world around us.

- We want to personally invite 100 people to worship at our Church this year.
- We want to equip 50 people to do hands on mission.
- We want to encourage one new leader in our church.
- We want to help 100 people gather together in Spiritual Study this year.
- We want to help increase our worship attendance from 70 to 80 people each Sunday.
- We want to welcome 5 adults as professing members of this Church.
- And we want to support missional ministry in our county, conference and country and world through our shared giving.

These are the goals we will seek together this year.

This is the inspired way we can walk together on a path toward life.

So today consider what goals inspire you?

What is the path God is leading you on to take part in this vision?

What creative ideas might you have and how might you take part in this future.

Together may we hear and share that voice that leads us, saying,

“this is the way, follow the path that leads to life.” Amen.

Sending Prayer (inspired by Revelation 21: 1-6)

God invites us into his future,

where the one who makes all things new has made his home among us.

We are called and chosen.

Remember God’s future, for this is our story. Amen.