

## **Isaiah 60:1-5**

### **The Ingathering of the Dispersed**

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,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

## **Matthew 2:1-12**

### **The Visit of the Wise Men**

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.

## Think Big...Kingdom Big

Today we celebrate New Year's Day. New Year's Day was actually a religious holiday among the ancient Babylonians who would promise their gods that they would return borrowed objects and pay off debts at the beginning of the new year, and Romans made vows to the Janus, the god of time depicted with two faces, one looking back and one looking forward, and for which the month of January is named. All around the world tonight people are gathering and merrymaking, looking back and looking forward, celebrating the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

In a similar way, Christmas is a dividing line between old and new; our Western calendar is based upon the year of Jesus' birth with what preceded it being designated B.C. and what follows being A.D. What was so radically different between what came before Jesus and what comes after? Has there been a major change in world history since Jesus arrived on the scene? Most certainly! We may not see it because the change has been slow and we're living in it, but the old continues to pass and the new continues to replace it, like Jesus replaces Herod or Caesar or any other authority. Jesus' birth marks a beginning of something radically different from what came before him.

And Epiphany too is a celebration of something new. Traditionally held on the first Sunday in January, Epiphany is not something that people get worked up over. People don't throw big parties and order cases of champagne to celebrate Epiphany. Even your average Christian would ask, "What is Epiphany?" It celebrates the time the wise men from the East, most likely Persians, came to Bethlehem to visit the baby Jesus, and you might wonder what's so great about that? I mean, they were *late* after all. They missed the fireworks, the angels announcing to the shepherds, the heavenly host singing, "Glory to God in the highest!" Epiphany actually marks the beginning of a rather scary time in the Jesus story as these wise men clue in King Herod about Jesus' birth, so even though the gold and the myrrh and the frankincense are all quite lovely, they come with a price; Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are going to have to run for their lives as King Herod attempts to dispose of this child king who challenges his power. Is that something to celebrate?

In fact it is. The word 'epiphany' means a sudden and profound realization; I think that for Mary and Joseph, Epiphany was a real epiphany; out of nowhere these three foreigners who are dressed funny and talk funny, show up at their door with fancy gifts for their baby boy, who they discern to be a king! The wise men of Israel apparently did not get the memo, but these three Persian fellows not only got the memo but travelled great distance to pay homage to Jesus. What is God doing? He is indicating that he is not simply the God of Israel. The Jews were expecting a Savior, someone resembling King David, who would restore all of Israel. But God was showing his plans to people across mountain and desert, and they were seeing that God was doing something spectacular.

And Jesus' life illustrates exactly what God is doing; he is establishing HIS kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, a kingdom that is so unlike the kingdom of Herod or Caesar or anyone else, a kingdom that is driven by compassion rather than extortion, by healing rather than injuring, by forgiving rather than punishing, by serving rather than being served. Human kingdoms were characterized by the authorities who try to hold onto power. Jesus demonstrates that all true power and all true authority belong to God, and he lives his life in submission to the will of God. The old way and the new way come into stark contrast at Calvary where Jesus is crucified; the powers of this world attempt to

prevent the new from taking hold, try to discredit and defeat the Kingdom of God; they want to have dominion over God himself. But in the resurrection we find that God is the ultimate winner, that Christ is the one who has all authority in this world, and though we still see the old way operating in this world, and even in the church, as people fight against one another and compete with one another and hurt one another, we who know Jesus Christ are not enslaved to sin. We give to those in need, we humble ourselves, we turn the other cheek, we walk the extra mile, we forgive those who trespass against us, we love those who persecute us. And in so doing we bear witness to God's kingdom which will one day wipe away everything evil and leave only what is good.

To the Church's credit we have been building God's kingdom through the years. We've established hospitals, clinics, schools, food pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters as well as organizations that work for peace and justice in this world. The world tries to discredit the Church by pointing to the many specks in our eyes while ignoring all the good that we do in Christ's name. We have tended to the needs of "the least of these" regardless of their religion or nationality because in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

But it's easy to lose sight of God's kingdom just as it's easy to lose sight of our New Year's resolutions a few months down the road and give up. And so I give you three recommendations: First, seek the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus advises us in Matthew's gospel (6:33). I don't mean to simply be a busy body do-gooder. That's working toward the kingdom of God, but you need to see what that kingdom really looks like, that is, have a vision of the kingdom. This reminds me of a story about three brick-makers, forming mud into bricks. When asked what he's doing, the first man says, "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm making bricks." The second man says, "We're building a wall," and the third man says, "We're building a beautiful cathedral that going to reach to the sky, and people will see the beauty of this cathedral and be in awe." All three men were doing the same thing. The first had no clear vision of the project he was working on, and the second only had a slight idea. But the third had a clear idea about what he was doing and why he was doing it. Which man do you think was most motivated? We need to have a clear idea of what God's kingdom will look like so that we don't get discouraged simply making bricks.

The second recommendation; set short-term goals. If I want to climb Mount Everest, I don't just buy a lot of equipment and an airline ticket to Nepal. There is a research phase. There is a training phase. All this could take years before I actually arrive in Nepal. Then the climb is done in various phases taking a total of about three months. Each phase becomes a goal in itself and must be accomplished before moving on to the next phase. Researchers who study New Year's resolutions discovered that people who set a goal of losing one pound a week affords you a much greater chance of success than setting the goal at 50 pounds in a year.

Third, don't go it alone. Whether it's building God's kingdom or following through with a personal resolution, it is not something we can achieve individually; we need to help one another along the way. That was the genius behind Alcoholics Anonymous; alcoholics discovered that as individuals that stood a much better chance of beating their addiction when they had a "buddy" who they could talk to and from whom they could draw support and encouragement. It works.

So hold fast to a vision of God's kingdom and always seek that kingdom, then proceed in increments. Solicit the help and support of others so that together we make real differences not only in our own lives but in the world around us.