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Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Ring Out! Ring In!

Happy New Year! Actually, we're already five weeks into the New Year. The Christian year began with the first Sunday in Advent, December 1. During Advent, we spent four weeks anticipating and preparing for the arrival of Jesus. On Christmas Eve we found joy in Jesus' birth. Last Sunday we celebrated the light of God with songs and scriptures from Genesis through Revelation. Today we end the season with Epiphany Sunday.

An epiphany is an experience of a sudden and striking realization – an illuminating discovery or disclosure. For Christians, Epiphany celebrates the revelation of God incarnate, God in the flesh in Jesus. It commemorates the making known of God's plan of salvation through Jesus. In the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Roman Empire, the Feast of Epiphany began as a celebration of Jesus' baptism. In the Latin-speaking west, Epiphany has been a festival emphasizing the visit of the magi to Jesus as described in the 2nd chapter of Matthew. The visit of these men from the East is regarded as the first of appearance of Jesus to the Gentiles, to people who weren't Jews.

Of course, even though we're already five weeks into the Christian year, we're also only five days into the new calendar year. I like the beginning of the new year. I like the physical act of taking the old calendar down from the wall and putting up a new one. My cell phone has replaced the two-year planner I used to carry in my purse, but I still keep one calendar on the wall at home. As I take down the old one, I remember events from the past year – what was good, what was bad, what I wish I had done, what I shouldn't have done. I transfer birthdays and other important dates to the new calendar and consider what the new year might bring – my hopes, my dreams, my goals.

A new calendar year marks an ending and a beginning. It provides an opportunity to reflect on the past and anticipate the future. It's good for us to do this individually and as a church community. By looking back, we can see more clearly how the presence of God has made a difference in our lives. This knowledge gives us hope for the future. This morning we'll consider passages from Isaiah and Ephesians,¹ reflect on occurrences of the past year, and express some hopes for the new one.

In Isaiah 60, the prophet offers hope and encouragement to a community of people who had returned to Jerusalem after living in exile in Babylon but are still being ruled by the Persians and harassed by their enemies. They're living in a ruined city and facing harsh economic conditions. Isaiah uses images of light and darkness to proclaim God's appearance and presence. He tells the people to look at what's happening now, even in the midst of all the destruction, and to look forward to what will happen.

We think of the wise men when we hear gold and frankincense mentioned in Isaiah 60:6, but we also could think of them when we read the rest of the passage. There is celebration and joy in the prophet's words: *Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD's glory has shone upon*

¹ Sources consulted include Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 52-57 and Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 68-72.

*you. Then you will see and be radiant; your heart will tremble and open wide.*² This describes what happened when the wise men found Jesus. They were overwhelmed with joy, the same joy Isaiah promised.

We read Isaiah 60 on Epiphany Sunday because it speaks of God bringing light, life, and hope to weary people living in difficult circumstances. These words encourage us too. They call us to take heart because the glorious grace of the Eternal God has come to dispel the darkness of despair by performing a saving work. Isaiah urges us to rise up, catch the vision of a new day, and continue to walk on the path to restoration and wholeness. Isaiah states that the whole world will be caught up in this new thing that God is doing.

In his letter to Christians living in and around Ephesus, the apostle Paul reaffirms this idea and points out how it is happening in their midst.³ The Gentiles, those who were born as outsiders to Israel, who were aliens to the covenant the Jews had with God, are now brought near to God through the work of Jesus. The Jews – who still claimed Israel as their homeland, but many now were dispersed throughout Asia – also have been saved by grace, not by the insider status given to them by birth. Jesus is the embodiment of peace, sent to make insiders and outsiders into one group, breaking down the dividing wall of hatred and hostility between them.

Ephesians 3:1-12 is read at Epiphany because it carries through the theme of the appearance of Christ to all the nations as part of God’s eternal purpose, God’s purpose from the beginning. It emphasizes the inclusion of all people, outsiders as well as insiders, as full-fledged members of the people of God. This inclusion in the mystery of the gospel revealed in Jesus. Jesus is the turning point in the divine story, the moment of revelation when God’s eternal purpose became fully known. Paul goes on to say that through the church, God intends to make this purpose known to everyone on earth and in heaven.

The question before us during the past five weeks has been “What are you waiting for?” I wonder how you’ve responded to that question. Maybe your response has been irritation that the question ends with a preposition. Maybe it’s been confusion about how the question relates to what we’ve done each Sunday.

I hope in spite of any irritation or confusion, you’ve been able to ask the question on several levels. What is God waiting for? What am I waiting for? What are we waiting for? As we ask these questions, we acknowledge the confusion and chaos, fear and foreboding that are present in the world. We also welcome the message of hope and purpose in the assurance that God is at work, in us and through us. We ask these questions as we remember stories from this past year. Stories of waiting and wondering, of waiting and receiving, of waiting and acting.

During this past year we’ve prayed for guidance, strength, energy, protection, patience, healing, comfort, wisdom, and relief from anxiety. We’ve prayed for parents, spouses, children, grandchildren, siblings, nieces & nephews, cousins, in-laws, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and strangers. We’ve asked for God’s presence with travelers, students, teachers, and leaders. We’ve mourned the deaths of loved ones. We’ve shared concerns about issues including gun violence, health care, climate change, immigration, refugees, and inclusion of those who are marginalized. We’ve prayed for local and church-wide organizations. We’ve served meals; collected soup and vegetables; provided school supplies, snacks, and markers; and prepared immigrant detainee kits. We’ve experienced job loss, job transitions, new jobs, and retirement. We’ve worked together to envision the future. We’ve rejoiced over improvement of health, successful surgery, wiser decision making, and new beginnings. We’ve celebrated birthdays,

² Isaiah 60:1, 5a, *Common English Bible*.

³ Ephesians 2:11-22

anniversaries, graduations, new homes, weddings, and new babies. We've found joy in music, hospitality, physical work, acceptance, love, friendship, and community.

The outcomes haven't been what we hoped for in every situation in 2019, but it's evident that even in times of pain, loss, and struggling with hard questions, the light of God has been with us. God is present. We are part of Epiphany.

My hope for 2020 – I suppose my hope for every year – is shalom – restoration, wholeness, completeness, the way God intended things to be. This includes good health (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual), comfort from grief, resolution of disagreements, civility, just laws, humility, an end to war and violence, healing of our planet, stable jobs, adequate food, shelter, and income for everyone, and insiders and outsiders living together as one body. All of these are part of the big picture of God's purpose and action.

Realistically, we know that not all of these will be achieved in the year to come, but each of us needs to decide what actions we can take in our specific situation. For example, eat well, get physical exercise, work on a relationship, make a phone call, visit someone, wish the best for someone we don't like, pray for someone, listen intently to someone, or do our job well. The specifics will be different for each of us. (As I wrote this list, I realized the ways in which I fail to practice what I preach.)

We also need to continue to discern as a church family what actions we can take as a group to bring about shalom. What can we do as a part of the body of Christ to bring wholeness to each other, our community, and our world?

I'll end with a poem written more than 160 years ago by Lord Tennyson. The sentiments expressed continue to be relevant today as we consider what we want to leave behind in the old year and what we hope to see happen in the new one.

CVI.⁴

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

⁴ From *In Memoriam* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

The wait is over. The mystery has been made known. Arise! Shine! Walk in this new path
and be transformed! Amen.