

Our Old Testament Scripture reading comes from the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 60. A frequent theme in Isaiah is his prophecy concerning the people's return from exile to Jerusalem. Our passage today is one such prophecy. But as we read it, we discover it has broader implications than just the return from the exile, for it describes the manifestation of God's light to a dark world both then and now. Listen for God's Word.

*Read Isaiah 60:1-7*

In our New Testament text, we find that the baby Jesus is now a young child. News of the birth of this king has traveled to other nations and other peoples, drawing them to Jerusalem to worship him. Listen again for God's Word.

*Read Luke 2:1-20*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The story is told of three executives who were defining what status means and how to know when you have really arrived. One said: "I'll tell you what real status is. It's being invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President." Another replied: "No, that's not it. You know you have arrived when you've been invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President, the hot line rings, and he just looks at it and decides not to answer it." The third executive said: "You both have it all wrong. Real status is when you are invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President, the hot line rings, the President answers it and says, 'Here, it's for you.' "

How do you and I define status? How do we know when we have really arrived?

This past week we welcomed in a New Year. For many a New Year means New Year's resolutions. Goals we want to accomplish this year. Perhaps those goals include reaching some

new accomplishment in your career or at school. Goals about health and fitness. Goals for where you want to be in a relationship by the end of the year.

Many people were very glad to see 2009 come to an end, as it was an especially difficult year from a financial standpoint. In light of those challenges, some of us might make it a goal to try to achieve better job security or financial security or get out of debt this year. For some, to quote a friend of mine, New Year's resolutions go in one Year and out the other. For others, we evaluate how good the year was by how many of our resolutions we achieved. How do you know when the New Year has been a good year?

This Wednesday, January 6, we celebrate Epiphany. In the church tradition, the festival of Epiphany celebrates the visit of the magi or wise men to the Christ child. More specifically, it is a celebration of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Epiphany literally means "a showing forth." It is the showing forth of God's glory - to the Jews, to the Gentiles, to all nations.

Of course, that word "epiphany" is used, not only in Christian beliefs, but in common everyday use as well. To experience an epiphany means to experience a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something. It seems appropriate that we celebrate Epiphany at the same time we celebrate a New Year because it seems to me that desire for epiphany is at the heart of any New Year's resolution. We all hope to experience some epiphany, some new essence or meaning of life, in the coming year.

So how do we do that? How do we experience an epiphany? How do we seek a showing forth of God's glory to us in 2010?

Matthew offers us two ways of seeking glory. One way is marked by worship. The other is marked by fear. One is characterized by receptivity; the other by hostility. One is

governed by divine leading; the other by self-leading. The first is the way of the wise men. The other is the way of Herod. The magi or wise men were likely astrologers or political officials in the courts of Persia or other regions east of Jerusalem. They had likely been trained in the sciences. Thus, they knew how to look for signs in the heavens. They had also likely been trained in diplomacy. Thus, they knew the diplomatic custom of sending emissaries to welcome and offer gifts to new kings of other countries, in this case, the king of the Jews. The magi's reference to the child as king of the Jews indicates that they themselves were not Jews, but Gentiles. So while they had been trained in religion as well, they were not as familiar with the Jewish Scriptures and the Old Testament prophecy concerning Bethlehem. As a result, in their quest for a king, it is natural that they head first to the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem because that was where the royal palace was, the rightful place of a king.

Once in Jerusalem, they do encounter a king - not the King of Israel chosen by God, but the King of Israel chosen by the Romans, Herod. When Herod hears that the wise men are seeking the king of the Jews, he is overwhelmed with fear. Herod knows that he is not the rightful heir to the Davidic kingdom; he only came into power by aligning himself politically with Rome. After having worked hard to claim the throne, Herod is not about to give up his status. So in order to learn the exact whereabouts of the true king, the Messiah, Herod calls together his chief priests and scribes, those who had been professionally trained in the teaching and application of the Old Testament law. They reveal to Herod what the prophet Micah said about Bethlehem's role in God's plan. Herod takes this knowledge of God's plan and plots to use it, not to promote God's will, but his own. He has the knowledge about God at his fingertips, and then uses it for harm, not for good. Sometimes, as Blaise Pascal says, knowledge of God is far from the love of God.

But lest we be quick to judge Herod, we must first examine the trace of Herod in each of our own lives. Do our goals and plans promote God's will, or our own? Herod knew the Messiah was the true king, but he resisted his right to rule. Don't we face the same temptation? Are there not areas in our life where we willingly acceptance Christ's rule and, at the same time, other areas where we are more resistant to His will and insist on our own way? We, like Herod, often try to solve life's problems through plans that insure our control or through logical, calculating schemes that insure we receive our share. But God is to be found in receiving, not grasping; in giving, not claiming our rights.

And so, it is through receiving and giving that the magi find the child Jesus. Unlike Herod and his scribes and others in Jerusalem, these men from another country prove receptive to the true king of the Jews and God's purposes in Him. In recognition of his kingship, they offer him gifts befitting a king – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, overwhelmed with joy, they kneel down and worship him. The Greek word for “worship” is one normally reserved only for the worship of a deity. As the magi did not know the Old Testament prophecy, it is doubtful that they are knowingly worshipping Jesus as God. But their worship is probably far deeper than they understand at the time. They believe this is God's Messiah, and so they worship the God of Israel revealed through Him. Their worship of Jesus as King is also a clear indictment of Herod's political leadership. Their worship shows that they choose God's rule over the world's rule.

Their worship runs far deeper than they understand because it is grounded farther back in time than they understand. They were led by a star to Jesus, part of a plan that was foretold centuries before. Isaiah prophesied of a time when kings would be drawn to Jerusalem. Other nations, Gentile nations, would be attracted to Jerusalem as to a beacon of light in the

surrounding darkness. Isaiah proclaims, “Your light has come.” That light would be made manifest when God took on flesh in Jesus Christ and entered into the brokenness and darkness of the world. Isaiah goes on to say, “The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Glory here does not mean some glow of light, nor does it mean some sense of accolade or status. The Hebrew word translated “glory” does not have the same ephemeral connotations as our English word for glory. In fact, it is just the opposite: The Hebrew word *kabod* connotes something weighty or significant, something real. In Jesus Christ that is what we are given – the reality of God.

God’s revealing God’s glory, God’s reality, to us in Christ has a purpose. Isaiah makes that purpose explicit: Israel is to be a light to the nations. Israel has a mission. When the light of God dawns in Israel, all the nations will recognize it for what it is and be drawn to it. These wise men were the first to join in the procession to the light, a procession that continues to the ends of the earth, until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Zion’s light is not for itself, but for others.

Consider a lamp in a room. The purpose of the lamp is not to give attention to itself, but to give attention to other objects in the room by shedding light on them. The same is true of the glory made manifest to us in Jesus Christ. In verse 6, Isaiah says that these rulers who bring gold and frankincense shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. Not the praise of the light’s bearer, but the light’s source, Jesus Christ. Glory is never for oneself. It is always to be shared, to be given away, reflected. Jesus Christ, the light of the world, gave away His life for the glory of His Father. Now He calls us to be His light in the world by giving our lives to God’s mission, by shining God’s light into the darkest places that the whole world might proclaim the praise of the Lord.

What does it look like to be a light in the darkness? According to theologian and professor Ann Belford Ulanov, it means “living love into the world.” In her writings, Ulanov gives an example of someone "living love into the world." She tells the story of a woman in Harlem who for forty years has been taking into her home the abandoned infants of drug-addicted prostitutes and raising them as her own. She is now in her eighties and very well known in Harlem. Women come and leave their babies on her doorstep. The babies they bring are addicted to drugs or have AIDS or both. She did not have drugs or medical treatment with which to care for the babies. But what she did have, she gave freely. She had love. As she said in one interview, she “loves them back into being.” Holding the infants and walking up and down with them, singing and talking to them as they suffer withdrawal from the drugs. Loving them back into being. As followers of Christ, we are given the privilege of loving the world back into being, to love it back into the reality God intended, the reality shown forth in Jesus Christ.

The need for us as servants of God to be lamps through whom Christ’s light can shine undimmed has never been greater than it is at this time, in this place, in this new year, when there are children facing the darkness of abandonment and drugs and AIDS in Harlem, in Snellville, in Atlanta, and around the world. When the darkness of war continues to rage across the globe. When countless people in our community face unemployment and eviction in the darkness of these economic times. Darkness covers the earth, but God’s glory has appeared over us in Jesus Christ. How is the Light of the World calling ua to be a light in His world in this new year?

There was a man named Dom Helder Camara who served as the archibishop of the poor in Brazil. His life was much like that of Mother Theresa’s in India. Camara was concerned not just for the moderately poor, those who benefit the most from various aid programs, but the poorest of the poor. In an article written about his life, Time magazine quoted a Methodist

missionary who served with Camara. The missionary paid Camara this tribute: "Being with him, watching him, listening to him, one is less and less aware of him and increasingly aware of the reality to which he points - a God who cares about the little people of the earth."

How will you and I know when we have arrived? How will you and I know when we have experienced something of essence or meaning this year, when we have experienced glory? We will know when our lives are marked by receiving, not grasping, by giving, not claiming our rights. We will know when people become less and less aware of us and increasingly aware of the reality to which we point. We will know when Christ's light shines in us and through us so that all the nations proclaim the praise of the Lord. Arise, shine, for your light has come.