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**“Arise, Shine”**

**Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC**  
**January 6, 2008**

**Hebrew Testament—Isaiah 60:1-6**  
**New Testament—Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12**

**word count: 1,626**

Our culture is devalued when minor events of pop-culture are given the status of real news. You know this is true if you have ever turned on CNN to watch the news and found yourself blasted backwards in your chair by the hyperventilations of Nancy Grace.

The church has voted to take stands on issues in the past. So—I wonder what the vote would be today if we set before the congregation the proposition to call ourselves, “an Open and Affirming, Just Peace and Britney-Free church.” Here, there will be sanctuary from news of the Federline-Spears’ drama.

Yet, to begin talking about Epiphany today, I am choosing to start out by asking you to recall a somewhat older pop-culture reference, being a specific episode of *the Mary Tyler Moore Show*. This is a first for me, and I *promise* not to do it very often. I gained some great wisdom from it. Really. Stick with me.

Ted Baxter is the vain anchorman of dubious intelligence. He is trying to give Mary a new philosophy on life when she’s in a rut. He says, “I know. You wake up every morning. You have some coffee. You drive to work. You work. Then it’s time for lunch. Then you work some more. Then you drive home. You make some dinner. You talk to a friend on the phone. You watch some TV, and you go to sleep. Then you wake up the next day, and have some coffee... Here’s how to change your life: (with great enthusiasm) WAKE UP in the morning! Then, make some *coffee*. Then DRIVE to work. Then go and have some LUNCH. WORK some more. ENJOY your drive *home*. Make some DINNER. *Really* TALK to a FRIEND on the phone. *Watch* some TV, and then GO...TO...SLEEP!”

This is the advice of a simpleton. But the reason this scene got so much laughter from the audience, was because there was an epiphany to be had in the simple wisdom of his advice. This kind of epiphany is described in the dictionary as “a sudden insight into reality, or the essential meaning of something often initiated by a simple, commonplace occurrence.”

The first definition of an epiphany is “an appearance or manifestation” (which means, “to make known”). The “keywords” of the season of the Epiphany that follows Christmas, comes from Isaiah 60:1: “*Arise, shine, for your light has come.*”

Taken together, this phrase tells us that during the season of Epiphany we explore how God has been made known in the world and what it means that a new light shines in the “darkness” of our world.

The Epiphany we speak of at this time of year is with regard to the epiphany of the three kings as they visit the infant in the stable. Even though, they weren’t kings, they were astronomers; we don’t know how many there actually were; Jesus wasn’t an infant, he was over a year old; and it wasn’t a manger, it was a house. Still, the magi’s journey is like this passage from Isaiah: “Arise, Shine, for thy Light is come.” They rose and followed the star to, as the dictionary says, “a sudden insight into reality, or the essential meaning of something often initiated by a simple, common-place occurrence.” The simple, commonplace occurrence, was of course, the birth of a child.

“They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord,” ends this passage. Well, these are symbols: gold represents Jesus’ royalty, frankincense represents his priesthood, and myrrh represents his death. These are the gifts of the magi.

The metaphor of light is present in all religions. At the time of this birth, the religion of Egypt had been changed to recognize God in the presence of light, or the sun. Rulers now had the

word “Aton,” meaning sun, attached to their name. Akhen-Aton, for example, represented this Pharaoh’s power through the sun.

Gnostic Christians, (after the Greek “gnosis,” for the “knowledge” that they were connected to God) believed that their souls would return to the light of God existing beyond the heavens. In one gnostic Christian writing, Jesus instructs people upon their death to move directly toward the light, and if they are stopped along the way, to say that they know they are part of the light of God that they are moving toward.

Near-death experiences always include an experience of great light; more powerful than any ever seen, but not blinding; towards which the traveler feels compelled to move.

Whether sacred or secular, the metaphor of light and dark has long represented purity, wisdom, and knowledge, vs. ignorance, fear, and unknowing. The metaphor has unfortunately also been conflated with prejudice in order to draw parallels that aren’t there with regard to race.

The great mystic Thomas à Kempis wrote the famous “Imitation of Christ” in 1426. He begins, “He who follows me, says Christ, walks not in darkness but will have the light of life.” à Kempis’ thesis is about a way of following our faith path by finding the light of life when we walk in the teachings and in the manner of Jesus. Arise, Shine, for our light has come.

ARISE!” is a blast of the reveille trumpet; a call to sleeping souls to wake up and live. There is a great need for this call of arousal. Some of us appear to live in a state of slumber. Sometimes, we rub our eyes, stretch our arms, and look around, only to go back to sleep. Many waste their lives not so much by doing wrong as by neglecting to do good. Sometimes we get briefly startled, something rouses us a little: a serious illness, shocking experience, a close call with death, or some personal or family crisis. But unfortunately, our awakenings are only slight, and don’t always last very long. “Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

Mystic Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths wrote:

“Christ had to go through death in order to enter into the new world of light, the world of communion with God. We have to go through death with him. This is the challenge that faces the world today. We are passing out of one world, the world of western domination, and entering a new age in which the logical, rational mind of Greek philosophy and Roman law, the economic and political order, the science and technology of the West, may be passing away.” Something new is emerging. Nobody knows exactly what form it is going to take. It is a moment of trauma, of birth. A day will come when all the present forms and structures pass away, and we may see uncovered the whole universe in space and time in the fullness of *real* reality.

Jesus was always outside of the reality of his time. He would always have trouble with authority, yet our faith story gives us this star, this light in the heavens at the beginning as if to confirm that God’s purpose was at work in him.

Today, how often does it happen that we miss the significance of an event because we are too close to it? We can miss the significance of life around us while others can travel from afar and pay homage like the magi. Artists and visionaries are derided during their lifetimes, yet their works and gifts shine clearly for future generations. Do we sometimes miss the light or misinterpret it the way Herod’s scribes did?

“Arise, shine, for your light is come. 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. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels,” says Isaiah. Frankly, I can do without the part about being covered by camels, even if they are young ones. But I *do* want to feel life more radiantly, and I want my heart to thrill and rejoice, and to be surrounded by the abundance of God’s grace.

Arise, shine, for your light is come—it is present in the table that is set for you here. It is present in the Christ-consciousness that we can try to find within us in the gift of the spirit that dwells among us. It brings joy in the midst of despair, and hope in a world that knows darkness all too well. It is God’s presence changing things, and God’s light is for the whole world. Even a world where our culture as we know it is passing away for something new to live through it.

Arise, Shine, for your light is come. Epiphany. God’s presence is made known to us in a new way. The epiphany I have had is that it doesn’t matter if your epiphany is the same as mine, as long as your epiphany is, as the dictionary says, “a sudden insight into reality, or the essential meaning of something.”

Arise, Shine, for your light is come. We have two parts to our being: The traveler and the journey. The journey will take us only God knows where, but the traveler will have to interpret that journey. So *Get up* from this service today. Go outside and *Enjoy* some coffee. Drive home *joyfully*. Have a nice *lunch*. Really *talk* to your friends and family. Go to *sleep*. Go to *work* tomorrow. It’s your choice how you look at it, so you might as well have an epiphany right here that God *is* with us, *Emmanuel*. Arise, shine, for your light has come. Be on the journey, follow the light, and bring your gifts to the Christ child in how you bring light to yourself and to others.

### **Scripture for Sunday, January 6, 2008 “Arise, Shine”**

#### **Isaiah 60:1-6**

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. 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.

#### **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.