

CIRCUIT SERVICE FOR 8 JANUARY 2023

Rev. David Jenkins

Call to Worship-Today is the nearest Sunday to Epiphany. An epiphany is a moment of extraordinary revelation-when something of the wonder and holiness of God is made known to people. The particular epiphany celebrated today is when God is revealed to the travellers who had followed a star in anticipation of glimpsing a significant new ruler. They came seeking and found even more than they had anticipated.

Hymn 228 Singing the Faith (125 Hymns and Psalms) "Hail to the Lord's Anointed"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mCCwBqiQdk

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
Great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
To set the captive free,
To take away transgression,
And rule in equity.

He comes, with succour speedy,
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy,
And bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for sighing,
Their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Were precious in his sight.

He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth;
Love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
Spring in his path to birth;
Before him, on the mountains,

Shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness, like fountains,
From hill to valley flow.

Kings shall fall down before him,
and gold and incense bring;
all nations shall adore him,
his praise all people sing;
To him shall prayer unceasing
And daily vows ascend,
His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.

O'er evry foe victorious,
he on his throne shall rest;
from age to age more glorious,
all blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever,
his changeless name of love.

(James Montgomery 1771-1854)

Prayer

We thank you, Living God, for the times in life when we glimpse something of your glory.

It might be in the rising or setting of the sun.

It might be in the beauty of a painting.

It may be in a sudden act of unexpected kindness.

It may be in some noble quality glimpsed in the life of any human being-of courage, of selflessness, of dedication.

Thank you for all the moments in life which help to convince us of how worthwhile life is, of how special other people can be, of how deeply you have indentified yourself to us in Jesus.

Forgive us for the many times we fail to see the sign of your glory that are all around us.

Forgive us for the tunnel vision of the things with which we are preoccupied that shuts out a deeper recognition of who we are and of where we are.

Stimulate our senses, make us alive with the constant discovery of your being at the heart of our own existence. And help us to go on searching for more of you in the life of each day. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

All-Age Talk- "Lost in a Blizzard"

This is a true story of Scottish teacher, Isa MacArthur who was teaching in Canada. It is published in "More Stories for the Junior Assembly" edited by D M Prescott

"One day I was teaching some children in a little log school. I intended staying the night with a young couple about 10 miles away. As I came to the end of the lesson, I kept looking anxiously out of the window. The sky was piling up with sullen grey clouds, reddening into an angry sunset. However, the children ran out quite cheerfully, and rode off in their various directions laughing and shouting.

My horse Starlight stood fidgeting, the snow swirling around his hoofs in little puffs. I clambered into the saddle and cantered off down a white trail between darkening trees, then out across an open plain above the Pine River valley. Already the snow was beginning to fall, and the trail quickly became drifted over, with great stretches no longer visible.

Presently I realised with a pang that Starlight had lost his way. It was still daylight, and I could see ahead where patches of the trail were clear of snow; and we soon got back on it. Usually, by daylight or dark, horses can keep to a track, however badly it is drifted over: so I was worried about Starlight's uncertainty. Darkness was gathering fast, and the snow was falling much thicker now.

There was a deep canyon to cross, over the Pine River; and by the time we came to its edge we were in thick darkness. However, somehow we managed to keep to the zigzag trail down the face of the hill, at the bottom thudded across the long wooden bridge, and came safely up the steep hill on the other side.

It was so dark, and the snow falling so thick, that I could see nothing at all. But by this time we were on the level ground at the top of the hill, with only 3 miles to go. Then Starlight stopped dead and refused to move. I got off and discovered that we were in deep snow -no sign of any track. I walked the horse round in circles, trying to find the solid-packed ice of the trail again; but there was only snow, well above my knees, and sometimes in deep drifts. I knew that in these blizzards even an "old timer" could miss a building a few feet away. What hope could there be for me of finding a solitary house 3 miles off, when I had no idea of the direction? I had heard, too, that someone lost in a snow storm usually wandered around in circles.

I felt panic rising within me. Then something stronger than fear took hold of me, and I prayed.

Immediately a strange thing happened to me. Up to that moment everything had been hostile: the darkness, the snow, the intense cold, the steep drop somewhere near, down to the river far below. Then all at once everything was different. As never before, I was aware of the vast friendliness of and through the universe of God's creating. The snow, the darkness, the cold that had been so hostile a moment before were suddenly hostile no longer. They were simply the work of God's hands, expressing God's love.

Then something else happened-how, I cannot tell. Perhaps some freak of wind somewhere, though there seemed to be no wind.

The falling snow that had closed round me like a blanket, almost suffocating, was torn apart for a moment, like a curtain torn in two, and I saw the dark steeps, clear of snow, on the far side of the canyon. Then the blanket closed down again; but I knew now which way I was facing.

Starlight refused to move unless I led him. So, through the deep snow I worked my way. Sometimes he jerked back, and would not go on, so I knew we had come too near the edge of the canyon. We seemed to struggle on for hours, and presently I knew I should have to stop. I was already getting drowsy. But in that cold it would be dangerous to rest.

Just at that very moment my groping hands touched barbed wire. Knowing a house must be near, I shouted with all the strength I had left. A door opened close alongside, a dog was barking wildly, light was streaming out, blazing like flame on the falling snow. A man appeared with a lantern.

"Gosh, you're right off the road", he called. "Follow the fence left for a hundred yards, and you'll come to our gate."

"I can't go a hundred yards," I said feebly.

"OK. Tie your horse to the fence there -that's it. Now give me your hand and come under the wire. And now come right in. I'll see to your horse."

By the time he got back into the house, his wife had produced hot soup. As he stamped the snow off his feet, he was staring at me.

"Can't think how you made it. that animal of yours is snow-blind-couldn't keep to the path just going as far as the barn."

I had arrived at the right place. I looked at my watch.

I could hardly believe my eyes. We seemed to have been struggling all night, but it had only taken us 3 hours to plough through that snow. I could not have made better time in daylight. I must have come dead straight. I had indeed been shown where to plant my feet."

Hymn 224 Singing the Faith (121 Hymns and Psalms) "As with gladness"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sp52sx2_GYs

As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright;
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to Thee.

As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before
Him whom heav'n and earth adore;
So may we, with willing feet,
Ever seek Thy mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
At that manger rude and bare;
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from sin's alloy,

All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to Thee, our heav'nly King.

Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

In the heavenly country bright
need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun which goes not down;
there for ever shall we sing
alleluias to our King.

(William Chatterton Dix 1837-98)

Readers -

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift 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.

⁵Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

⁶A 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 2:1-23

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.' ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "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^[d] my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴ Then Joseph^[h] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,^[i] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.^[j] ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' ²¹ Then Joseph^[k] got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Hymn 218 Singing the Faith (217 Hymns and Psalms) "Unto us a boy is born"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjlhpdap7FI>

Unto us a boy is born
King of all creation
Came He to a world forlorn
The Lord of every nation.

Cradled in a stall was He
With sleepy cows and asses

But the very beasts could see
That He all folk surpasses.

Herod then with fear was filled
"A Prince", He said, "In Jewry!"
All the little boys be killed
At Bethl'em in His fury.

Now may Mary's son, who came
So long ago to love us
Lead us all with hearts aflame
Unto the joys above us.

Omega and Alpha He
Let the organ thunder
While the choir with peals of glee
Doth rend the air asunder

(Percy Dearmer 1867-1936)

Sermon "Dangerous Journeys"

It was a dangerous journey for Isa McArthur riding Starlight.

Perhaps there are journeys you have experienced which have also had their dangers?

We can imagine the extreme life-threatening hazards faced by so many people who are fleeing for their lives away from danger, but possibly through further dangers, and longing for a place of safety and belonging at the end.

The journeys described in Mathew Chapter 2 are filled with danger -for the travelling seekers, the Magi; for Joseph, Mary and Jesus; and for the families in Bethlehem where Herod's megalomania and paranoia lead to the most dreadful slaughter of young children.

Little did the Magi realise the risks they were running for themselves and others in going to Herod's palace. Herod's whole career was red with the blood of murder. He had massacred priests and nobles; he had caused the High Priest, his brother-in-law, to be drowned in pretended sport before his own eyes; he had ordered the strangulation of his favourite wife, though she seems to have been the only human being he passionately loved. His sons, his uncle, his wife's uncle and father, his mother-in-law, his kinsmen and friends were among those who fell victim to his suspicions. Some were burnt to death; some were hacked to pieces; some were secretly assassinated; others were forced to confessions by unspeakable torture. His reign was so cruel that his own countrymen said the survivors during his lifetime were even more miserable than the sufferers. The Roman Emperor said of him, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

The deaths of the infant boys in Bethlehem were of a piece with his awful catalogue of killings.

It would not be difficult to name latter day Herods, those intent on remaining in power and effectively removing any opposition.

Jesus' life was always threatened by danger-from the very first.

The artist, Holman Hunt, painted a picture of the young Jesus helping Joseph in the carpenter's shop. and in the background of the painting is a shadow of some of the tools Jesus is using. The shadow takes the shape of the cross.

Even in these hidden years of Jesus' young development the shadow of the cross was lurking in the background in an ever-present threat to his life.

And as soon as his public ministry began, the threats intensified.

From very early on there were plots against his life.

Realising the risks he was taking and the growing strength of the opposition to him, he shared with his disciples what he believed would be the likely outcome of it all.

In the last week of his life the plots culminated in a plan to snatch him in the darkness, try him quickly and arrange his execution before most people were aware of what was happening.

And the plan worked-up to a point.

In a play by John Masefield the wife of Pontius Pilate asks a centurion where Jesus was, and the centurion replied, "Set loose in the world, lady, where neither Roman nor Jew can stop his truth".

The final victory did not belong with those who worked swiftly in the darkness, but with the One who works openly in the light.

To search for Jesus meant taking risks-for the Magi, and perhaps searching for Jesus still involves risk in various societies.

To actually follow him is to run bigger risks still, as many Christians around the world could tell us from their own experience.

Jesus' own invitation, after all, is "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"..

It is dangerous to follow Jesus-and yet-when those who search find, theirs is an unbelievable joy. The little verse in Matthew 2 translated in sober English as "When they saw the star they were overjoyed" actually uses no less than three words in Greek to describe that joy. It would literally be something like, "When they saw the star they were overjoyed very very much with great delight". The joy of those who find Jesus is more wonderful than any words can express, and is worth all the rigours, uncertainties, hardships and dangers of the journey.

To those who follow him, it is not only the prospect of a cross that Jesus holds out to them, but the fullness of life, the hope of resurrection and of an everlasting purpose.

The most severe deprivations of life cannot take away the "solid joys and lasting treasure" of God with us.

At times the journey of seeking God in Jesus is dangerous; at times it is bewildering. there were times when the Magi lost sight of the star and so must have had their doubts.

We may lose sight of our vision at times; we may not always understand the ways of God-but if we hold on, persevere, keep on the road, far greater joys await than we could ever anticipate.

Prayers- What things have happened that you wish to give thanks to God for? What has happened for which you wish to ask our community's prayers?

Pray for each thing mentioned as they are mentioned... (and don't be afraid of a little silence). Finally, finish with a short prayer to wrap up the time of Intercession. It is important to acknowledge God's agency in our prayers and to acknowledge the prayer that may be too painful or personal for people to say out loud.

Lord God, creator of all things, you gaze at your creation and declare that it is good. Hear our prayers for healing, guidance, and hope – spoken out loud and those too close to our hearts to share with another. We look with expectation to the restoration of all things in your presence. Amen.

Hymn 34 Singing the Faith (505 Hymns and Psalms) " O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBEmXFkwcOE>

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him, the Lord is his name!

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
High on his heart he will bear it for you,
Comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
Guiding the pathway your feet should pursue.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth you would count as your own:
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to bring to his throne.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
He will accept for the name that is dear;
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him, the Lord is his name!

(John Samuel Bewley Monsell 1811-1875)

Benediction - Companion and guide through every hazardous journey we ever undertake, reassure us of your constant presence, Father, Son and Spirit, Amen.