

“Arise! Shine!”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Epiphany – January 4, 2015

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Matthew 2: 1-12

Raise your hand if you have already put away your Christmas decorations (see how many people raise their hands). Now, of those of you who have already put your decorations away, how many of you put them up the weekend of Thanksgiving? Alright, put your hands down.

Raise your hand if you still have your decorations up. Of those of you who still have them up, how many will put them away this coming week? This month? How many still have decorations up from last year? You laugh – there’s a house in our neighborhood that keeps its Christmas tree up 12 months a year, and you can see it through their living room window. Truth be told, I think we still have some decorations up from a year ago at our house.

Another question for you, but this time I need you to respond with your mouths, not your hands. What do you appreciate about the decorations we see for Christmas? How do they make you feel? (Responses included joy, happiness, warmth, memories of past family and traditions.) For most of us, seeing decorations during the holiday season evoke feelings of hope, joy, and warmth amid the cold, dark, shorter days of winter.

And yet, whether it’s December 26, January 1, or later this month, we will take down the tree ornaments, stockings, wreaths, and other decorations. We will place them in boxes and bags, and haul them off to the basement, to closets, or to the attic. The transformation is usually swift and stark. This space is an example of that: when you arrive next Sunday, all of these Advent and Christmas decorations will be put away – well, that’s as long as we have enough volunteers to help us Saturday with de-decorating! This turn of the calendar can almost feel like a shock to the system: we go from celebrating the birth of Jesus one day, and one week later we are closing the books on the year that just ended, and looking ahead to a new year.

I wonder if sometimes we mentally and spiritually do the same thing when Christmas is over. We have celebrated God’s gift to the world in Jesus Christ. We have been uplifted by special worship services, gatherings with family and friends, exchanging of gifts, and an emotional “high” which comes from the Christmas season. But when the decorations are put away and the calendar turns to January, we tend to “put away” the light of the world that we celebrated less than two weeks ago. We leave behind the warm and inspiring memories of Christmas, and instead go back to our routines of work, family, even church – tempted to feel as if nothing has really changed.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (60:1). Before we can physically and spiritually leave Christmas

behind, we are met today by the magi and the gifts they bring to the newborn king. Before we can leave behind the candlelight shining in the darkness, we are reminded by the prophet Isaiah that that light is still here, still shining, still breaking through the darkness of this world.

On this Epiphany Sunday, we are reminded that not only do kings from far away pay homage to God-with-us, Emmanuel, but also that God's glory is literally "shining forth" in the human form of Jesus the Christ. Isaiah almost prods us out of our winter doldrums or self-centered wallow, exclaiming: "Lift up your eyes and look around; nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (60:3-4). Isaiah is speaking to a people who have come out of exile and are now seeking the restoration of Jerusalem as Israel's spiritual and political capital. But the prophet's image of light and hope and joy speak to the proper response to God's gift at Christmas: bowing in humility and deep gratitude alongside these kings from far, far away.

Andrew Nagy-Benson writes: In 1907, in his parting address to the National Council of Congregational Churches, Washington Gladden urged his peers to see the church as a manifestation of Christ. For Gladden, one of the chief reasons for Christ's life and for the life of the church was "to make men and women feel that the great joy of life . . . is the joy of service; to populate this world with a race of people whose central purpose it shall be, not to get as much as they can, but to give as much as they can - this is what Jesus came into this world to do."

In light of today's passage from Isaiah, "giving as much as they can" seems to be a most fitting response to the revelation of God in Jerusalem and in the life of Jesus Christ. The foreign rulers cross the threshold of Israel with riches. The magi cross the threshold of Bethlehem with riches. Likewise, when the light shines in our darkness and the darkness does not overcome us, we are invited to cross the threshold of joy ([Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 198).

As we enter a new year of life as the Body of Christ in this place, may we not be afraid to cross the threshold of joy in service to God. May we not be afraid to step forward in gratitude to lend a hand, to offer care, to provide leadership, all as means of reflecting the light of God to a world filled with darkness. My prayer is that I will witness more of us shining that light in service in the coming year, and fewer of us packing that light away like all of our Christmas decorations.

Which brings me back to my neighbor and their year-long Christmas tree in the window. Perhaps that tree will no longer be a source of laughter for me, but rather inspiration. For when I see it, I will remember that the gift of God which the magi adored, which the shepherds worshipped, which Mary and Joseph cherished - the gift which changed all of our lives - is not to be celebrated one day or one month a year. That gift is to be cherished and honored and celebrated every day we are blessed to be upon this earth.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (60:1). Thanks be to God. Amen.