

**Following Where Jesus Leads**  
**Isaiah 60:1-12 / Matthew 3:13-17 / Matthew 2:1-12**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Baptism of the Lord (plus Epiphany)**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**January 8, 2023**

This is a strange year, with Christmas Day and New Year's Day both on Sundays—it throws off our regular rhythm a little bit. Along with that, we just came through that strangest, somewhat cruel of times in the year. I am speaking of the week between Christmas and New Years—when you're the most exhausted, when there is the least amount of sunlight. This hard shift from the pressure to celebrate, over to the pressure to set goals and become a better person. Go online. Ads for last minute gift ideas suddenly transform into short videos about intermittent fasting and gut cleanses. It's exhausting!

Epiphany was a few days ago, on Friday. In our tradition, Epiphany Sunday was last Sunday. Baptism of the Lord Sunday is today. These are two major observances. Given those two choices, which to focus on today? We have three scriptures because I wanted to focus on a question that threads all of these together.

Who is Jesus, and how do we respond to that question?

Each of our scriptures has a perspective that includes this question. The Isaiah passage might be the scripture most relevant to us today. The voice in this, Isaiah passage is the voice of the prophet — not God's voice, not a narrator's voice, but we are hearing the voice of the prophet.

In Robert Alter's commentary on his Hebrew Bible translation, he says that what is going on here is the dawning of something new, something that will be as bright and obvious and impactful as the dawning of the sun. Good things are coming, but we don't know what that's going to look like. Based on verse 6, we think it involves lots of camels?

The prophet's message of this text is that unimaginably good things are about to happen, so we trust that this is true, even if we don't really see it or understand it ourselves. We offer thanks to God, even if we have no idea what that is going to look like, even if it hasn't happened yet.

That is a pretty good New Year's message for the church. God is GOOD, God's work are good, and once it happens it will be obvious to all — but at the moment, we don't have evidence. We are to determine if we trust, or not. 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.

That's another good message for us today, an important nuance. Whatever the thing that God is just about to do, it goes far beyond just

ourselves. It is like the sun! It is for all the nations of the world, all of them will be attracted to it.

In a time of factionalism, when some things are too dangerous to say aloud, hearing that God gives God's own self and God's own goodness to every person and every nation in the world — that is good news, just maybe not the reward that is only for us that we might have expected. After all, that line about your gates being open constantly — means that people are welcome in constantly, no one is excluded, no exceptions, no restrictions, everyone is welcome, a place at the table.

That line about kings coming to the bright light makes us think of the magi, right? The Isaiah text is one reason tradition has it that the visitors from the east were Kings. Many Biblical translations call them wise men. Perhaps they were wise because they were the first to follow the star, even though they had no idea where it would lead them. Perhaps they were wise, because they believed that something very important was happening, but were also **willing to say we don't know**.

Perhaps the example that they give to us is that in following Jesus, we do not know where that will take us. It brought the Wiseman to Herod, about as dangerous place as you could be in those days.

Next week I'll talk a little about Rev. Dr. MLK — it brought him imprisonment, and government harassment and slander, and assassination before turning 40. Following Jesus as sincerely as you are able, might bring you into situations that observers see as stupidly

dangerous. And if you are doing that without hard data on what will be your payoff for taking such a risk — remember that famous bit from 1st Corinthians, “This world’s wisdom is foolishness to God.”

That one works the other way round — Gods wisdom is foolishness to the world. If you want to follow Jesus, you should know that it has led many people to places that they did not anticipate. Verse five notes that YOU will begin to shine, reflecting the light of God, and that the nations will come to you.

If your light attracts people, what do you do with them? This is a vital question for us here, as we contemplate the vision we have for this Christian community. When people see what we are doing and want to know more, what is the message we have for them?

That’s a good New Year’s message, too.

We note the Baptism of the Lord in our other Gospel reading. It is one of the major places in scripture we look to in trying to talk about the Trinity — we have God the son being baptized, God the Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and God the father speaking from heaven, about being pleased with his Son who stands before you. In a sense, this gets at that age old question — because we baptize in the name of Jesus, then why would Jesus himself need to be baptized?

The Baptism of the Lord is a perfect time to remind ourselves of our commitment to living a life of grace and hope outwardly — meaning living in a way so that others can see it. That’s why I wanted us to consider both scriptures this week. Epiphany and baptism both are all about the revealing of Christ to the world. Both ask us to consider what are we going to do about it. Baptism reminding us of public commitment to Christ, and following the star reminding us that we do so without knowing just where it is that the star will bring us. Maybe a palace to see a newborn King! — or maybe a stable, and a baby in the feeding trough. Sounds like they didn’t see that coming.

What God has in store for us as a congregation, or for each of your families, or you as individuals. I do know that this year is going to be history-making for the United Methodist Church. But how? Is this something to welcome, or something to dread? I have no idea. Baptism reminding us of public commitment to Christ, and following the star reminding us that we do so without knowing just where it is that the star will bring us.

OK, Jesus — lead the way. Amen.