

January 7, 2023 @ Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Over a decade ago, I was living in Nome, Alaska, working for a Catholic radio station while I began the process of finding my first call – the first church I would serve as a pastor. I remember, early one morning, I heard back from a church that wanted to interview me – and how special it felt that things were moving forward. We scheduled a time to talk, and I got to thinking about how God’s call to ministry takes some odd twists and turns. After all, there I was on the Bering Sea, a half-continent away both from my home state of Michigan and from the church that wanted to interview me, in New Mexico. That evening, my four roommates and I got another exciting call – one we had been hoping for since we moved in! The Aurora Borealis, the northern lights – they were shining in the skies above the tundra! We all rushed to get our warm clothing on, hopped in the one car that we shared, and drove out of town to a remote hillside, where we plopped down on the tundra, and watched the skies above.

If you’ve seen pictures of the Aurora, you know that it’s usually shimmering with a green light. That’s how this began, too – a soft green ribbon, shimmering across the sky. Bands of color, waving in the celestial wind. But then – something unexpected. Some of the bands changed color, fading from green, and back into a bright pink! It was hard to look away, despite the cold and frozen ground, but it seemed like the whole world around us was lit up with green and pink light, each casting shadows in different directions. And every now and then, a white streak would light up the sky, more brightly than the northern lights, even if just for a few moments – these shooting stars were a coincident meteor swarm! Awestruck at the beauty of the heavens above, my roommates and I stayed put for over an hour and a half, mostly in silence. When the Aurora had dimmed a bit, and we were solidly cold, we stood up, and marveled again – for, while the cold of the permafrost had seeped into our bodies, we had transferred heat back into the ground below us. Without even trying, we had made “permafrost angels” shaped to our bodies – a

melted spot that continued to look upwards even as we warmed up at home with cocoa and conversation.

I've often remembered those lights above – the beauty and majesty, even glory, of a sky illuminated not just by stars but by curtains of light and streaks of meteors. In the world before electric lighting, such an amazing display would have been more frequently seen – especially by peoples around the world who tried to interpret meaning from everything that takes place in the skies above.

The sky was considered God's home by the ancient Hebrew people – God is referred to in several places in the Bible as *El elyon* – God-from-on-high. The lights of the stars and the moon and the sun are all referred to as reflections of God's glory – and the prophets play with this concept frequently, referencing the light of God shining from people, just as it shines from the heavens. As Isaiah says, "Arise, shine, your light has come; the Lord's glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the Lord will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you.... Lift up your eyes, and look all around.... Then you will see and be radiant; your heart will tremble and open wide."

Perhaps, then, it's no wonder that Magi, who were ancient astronomers and advisors to kings in Persia, Parthia, and beyond, would take note of special signs in the skies. While there were no cameras at the manger, and we'll never have a complete picture of the star of Bethlehem that the Magi followed westward, I can only begin to picture its beauty by remembering the aurora. Yet, most of our imaginings of the star of Bethlehem, that famous Christmas star, do so as a linked set of crosses, a horizontal one in the form of St. Andrew's cross, and a vertical one with a very long tail, pointing downward. It's rare to see any movement depicted in the star – yet, clearly the Magi followed something. I like to imagine it as akin to the aurora, pulsing and waving through the atmosphere above in pinks and greens and whites, beckoning all who see it to stop and look up at the marvel of God's creation – and then down, seeing the Word made flesh, God choosing to become fully human. Perhaps this is only visible in hindsight, but the radiance of God shone from the heavens, and from Jesus, and from all who followed the Way that Jesus

taught.

That light from God is not any less beautiful when we can't see it. Indeed, we continue to shine with its invisible lovelight, that occasionally flares into the visible world. As my great-grandfather put it in a prayer-poem:

Stars that shine above, tell of God's love.

For even when clouds hide, still they are there.

So we, dear Father, though shadows hide Thee,

Know Thou art keeping watch with tenderest care.

Beauty and love, visible and invisible – God is our constant companion, now and always. Along with the Hebrew people, along with the Magi, along with the early church, and along with our neighbors, we follow God's light in our lives. The Magi found wisdom in their journey, and returned with word of the divine in the world. Yet, amid their search, shadows emerged – Herod's deceit veiled by the guise of reverence, threatening the purity of the newborn's light. This paradox, where shadows seem to cloak divine radiance, echoes our own reality – an imperfect world where darkness and light contend with each other. But pure light would blind us as surely as pure darkness – perhaps this is why God's presence, though constant, is only occasionally visible.

Our souls resonate with the celestial dance of stars, the heavenly starlight, bearing witness to God's unwavering presence in all places – the heavens above, on earth below, and within our hearts. The cosmic ballet reminds us that God's light persists, guiding, comforting, and revealing. Even its shifting colors remind us that life is always in motion – reforming and reorganizing according to the will of God.

Our lives are woven with moments of unexpected beauty, unexpected turns, and unseen connections. It's in these intricacies that God's guiding hand manifests – a vibrant reminder that amidst life's twists and turns, God's light persists, illuminating our paths and inviting us to reflect the light in our daily encounters. In the busyness of our lives, it's easy to overlook the divine choreography unfolding around us – a dance of grace, love, and unexpected joy.

As we navigate our early pilgrimage, let us remain attentive to the hues of God's presence. The lights above are not limited to those who look up, as we reflect God's light in our lives. So, let us heed the divine invitation – becoming bearers of God's radiant revelation. Let us marvel in the majesty above, and leave “angels” of our presence behind us, from the warmth we share with the world. Let our lives echo the Magi, who sought wisdom, and were willing to listen when God sent them warnings – and also were able to marvel at God's presence in the world.

May you follow the light of God wherever it leads you. May you be filled with the light of the Holy Spirit to shine from you on every path you take, whether it's the one you expected, or not. May the light of Jesus shine from the face of all you encounter, that you can know that we are all children of the Light. Amen.