

Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14)

In the midst of wars, natural disasters, debt, illness, all the hardships of life,
why have you come to worship?

**We come because Isaiah reminds us
that no suffering or pain can separate us from God.**

I hear the Prophet calling, "Arise, shine for your light has come!"

I'm ready for that bright light from God to light my way.

We see that light in Jesus, God-with-Us,
and we recognize that light in our lives, too:

We are all created in God's image:

God's light was born in us as we breathed our first breath.

**We come to worship to connect God's light in us
to God's light in Christ, and so illumine the world.**

What a reason to worship!

How do we recognize that light?

In compassion for all, in justice for the poor,

in welcome for the stranger we shine God's light into the world.

So come let us bring the joys and hardships of life to worship

and celebrate that God's light is already with us and within us.

Hymn The First Noel, v3-6

And by the light of that same star
Three Wise men came from country far
To seek for a King was their intent
And to follow the star wherever it went
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Then entered in those Wise men three
Fell reverently upon their knee
And offered there in His presence
Their gold and myrrh and frankincense
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the kind of Israel!

This star drew nigh to the northwest
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest
And there it did both stop and stay
Right o'er the place where Jesus lay
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord
That hath made heaven and earth of nought
And with his blood mankind has bought
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!

Children's Time

Gifts

Loving God, we offer you our gold:
The glow on the faces of children at play
The shining moments that brighten our lives.
We offer you our frankincense:
The quiet reassurance of familiar things
The grace of care and friendship
The blessing of bread and our heart's yearning in prayer.

We offer you our myrrh:
The ashes of our dreams
The bitter taste of our failures
The shadows through which we stumble.
Transform our inadequate gifts,
that they may be an acceptable sacrifice of praise,
and transform our lives to reflect more deeply your justice and joy
In the life of the world. Amen

Hymn We have travelled over mountains (Tune *Battle Hymn*)

We have travelled over mountains,
we have travelled over sands,
we have struggled with our camels
'til we came to Herod's land,
we were following a star
because a royal birth it was planned –
a child to lead us all!

*Walk together to see Jesus,
lead your camel to see Jesus,
see the start that leads to Jesus –
come on, come on, come on!*

We have visited the palace,
been to posh Jerusalem,
we are looking for a baby,
who will lead both us and them.
We'll go on until we find him –
so let's go to Bethlehem;
the star will lead us all!

Walk together to see Jesus,...

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Opening Prayer

God of all time, we praise and adore you for breaking into the darkness of this world
with the glorious light of your presence.

A light which made your love for the world visible in the babe born in Bethlehem -
Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.

A light which guided those gift-bearing travellers from afar to find and worship the Christ-child.

A light which leads us to you, now revealed in Jesus Christ.

We pray that you will accept our worship for it arises from hearts and minds
in awe over the enormity of your gift to us of pure love.

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

Hymn As with gladness men of old R&S 184 omit v4

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
Saviour, to your lowly bed,
there to bend the knee before
you, whom heaven and earth adore:
so may we with willing feet
ever seek thy mercy-seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
at your cradle plain and bare,
so may we with holy joy
pure and free from sin's alloy,
all our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to you, our heavenly king.

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 may we sing
alleluias to our King.

W.C Dix

Bible reading: **Psalm 72:1-7, 11-14**
 Matthew 2:1-12

Today I had a choice to make about which readings to use – those for Epiphany, which was yesterday, or those for the baptism of Jesus which is celebrated today. Of course, whoever is leading worship has a choice to make every week – whether to follow the lectionary or not, which of the four readings to focus on, what hymns to choose and so on. And we have many choices to make in life, on a daily basis, but also in more general terms, and perhaps more so in January at the start of a new year, when we tend to make all sorts of commitments, promises or resolutions, which we often give up on or forget about pretty quickly, especially if they are of the eating less, exercising more variety!

In fact, it was a very easy choice – last year we had two baptisms, so I spoke quite a bit about baptism. The reading from Matthew's Gospel on the other hand, while focussing on the visit of the Wise Men, the Magi, and their gifts, alludes to the coming massacre of innocents and Jesus and his parents fleeing into exile in Egypt. We are never given those verses in the lectionary – who wants to hear about the killing of children, any more than we want to hear about the killing of thousands of children in Gaza – the news has for the most part moved on from that horror to the other disasters of the continuing war in Ukraine, earthquakes and plane crashes in Japan, storm damage and doctors' strikes – new year, same old stories and misery. But epiphany, the promise that God is with us, whatever happens, and we might say, given the evidence of Jesus' life, particularly in the worst of times, offers a glimmer of hope. Isaiah 60, which we didn't hear read, but is set for Epiphany, tells us that our light has come. We are admonished to lift up our eyes and look around, to recognise the light and rejoice. Do we see and take notice of the sign, like the Magi did? Do we take the risk and follow the light? Or are we like the local scribes and priests, who don't recognise the star over Bethlehem for what it is? Who don't hear the angel chorus. Who are frightened like king Herod of what the future brings.

After Jesus is born, according to Matthew, it is not the local people to whom Immanuel - *God-with-us* is first revealed, but rather to Magi from the East. Foreigners. Strangers. Outsiders who interpret dreams and investigate the night sky for signs. According to Luke, it was the shepherds who first heard the news of Jesus' birth and went to pay him homage. The shepherds were also outsiders – poor, and ritually unclean for the work they did; living on the hillsides with the flocks and not allowed to worship in the temple. But today is not about the shepherds, today is the turn of the Magi.

It was not in the grand holy city of Jerusalem, with its magnificent temple at the centre of religious, political, and economic power, where God chose to come close, but rather in Bethlehem, a lowly village in the hills away from the city. And it is not the great and powerful

King Herod on whom God's anointing rests, but on a vulnerable child-Messiah who "will save his people from their sins" and be called Immanuel, the coming light foretold by Isaiah. I'm sure we all know who king Herod is – the baddy of the story. He was a human tyrant, typical of many dictators and despots we could think of, except that he was a puppet of the Roman Empire, allowed by them to rule over a small Jewish kingdom.

Herod the Great ruled for just a few years—a terrifying era fuelled by chaos and trauma for the Jewish people. While his immense wealth funded building projects including the reconstruction and expansion of the Jerusalem temple, he was a ruthless tyrant, cementing his authority by brutal displays of dominance. He was perfectly willing to torture and kill his perceived opponents, even his own wife and sons. In Herod's view, there could be no greater threat to his rule than the one who is prophesied in ancient texts and acknowledged as king by gentiles from afar. If this child-king is the Messiah, he will rule under the authority of God - unlike Herod, whose political strings are held by Roman puppet-masters. No wonder Herod is frightened.

The passive form of the verb used to express Herod's fright, *tarassō*, means to be confused, troubled, stirred up, even terrified, which is how the New Revised Standard Version translates it. We heard it as 'disturbed', which seems even worse to me – to kill thousands of children because you are a bit disturbed about something! Herod is terrified of losing power, and Matthew says the people of Jerusalem are terrified as well—no doubt aware of what will happen to them in any conflict between Herod and his enemies – they will be caught in the crossfire. Their fears prove to be justified when Herod later orders the murder of young boys in an attempt to destroy Jesus.

History and current events are full of examples of earthly powers that are manifested through violence, killing innocent victims along the way. I've already mentioned two wars that fall into that category. Indeed, this child, whose birth is marked by a rising star, will die by such violence, killed by the Jewish authorities in cahoots with the Roman Empire, given the punishment of a political prisoner. Even in the light of that violent death, the Gospels are clear that God's way is not through earthly violence and oppression. The baby born in Bethlehem will lead in the way of a shepherd. He will preach and enact blessings upon the poor and needy, the grieving, the meek, the outsiders and outcasts. The birth of God's Messiah, of God in human form, is a sign to the world for healing and life, not for terror and death. Though humanity is very bad at reading the sign.

Thanks to countless works of art and school and church nativity plays, it is easy to imagine the Magi as three kings riding on camels, clothed in velvet cloaks, wearing jewelled turbans, and cradling treasures from a kingdom far away. Apart from the gifts, none of those details

appear in Matthew's account. We do not even know their names, despite long-standing traditions otherwise. There is no mention of camels, they could have walked for all we know. We don't know what they wore, what colour their skin was, what language they spoke or where exactly they came from; only that they were astrologers – learned people who studied the stars. What is clear is that they are outsiders to the Jewish people of God. Many scholars suggest that the Magi were practitioners of a different religion, such as Zoroastrian priests from Persia (modern-day Iran).

Whoever the Magi were, their presence in Bethlehem is important. In Matthew's account it is these learned stargazers who study the signs in the sky, dreamers who risk the arduous journey from afar, foreigners who find their way to the Christ child. The Magi seek answers to their questions by connecting their learnings with realities they see around them: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising".

In contrast, the local scholars and religious and political leaders of the day (scribes and chief priests) are also learned - they know the Scriptures - but until Herod inquires of them, they do not recognise that their knowledge might encourage them to look carefully at the evidence from God that appears around them. What hinders their ability to see the star? What hinders ours?

Whoever the Magi are, wherever they are from, whatever has prompted their desire to seek after the star and worship the one over whom it rests, they continue to be a reminder that the presence of God's Messiah is not limited to words on a page, attendance at worship, or even to prophecy and promise. He is called Immanuel, which means "God is with us." Ever and always; every day, wherever we are.

Epiphany is a promise that God is here, whether or not we notice the signs. What signs will we look for in this new year? And will we follow them, or blindly do what we've always done, just the way we've always done it? Will we stay strong to our resolutions and promises, or will we give them up before January is even finished? What choices will we make? Will we see the light and follow it?

Hymn In Bethlehem, with Jesus' birth (Tune *On Christmas night*)

In Bethlehem, with Jesus' birth,
the God of heaven came to earth;
a babe who left us free to choose;
a gift of love we could refuse.
What will we do? What will we say?
Will we welcome our God today?

First unknown strangers saw a star,
and seeking, travelled from afar.
Responding to its sign and call,
they journeyed, searched, then gave their all.
Will we, with them, both kneel and pray?
Will we welcome our God today?

King Herod found this quite absurd
although he had the prophets' word;
defensive, wary, trapped by fear,
he ordered slaughter far and near.
Will we, like him, push you away?
Will we welcome our God today?

This challenge still confronts us all:
this Christmas will we heed your call?
Will we be open to your care,
or fight against the love you share?
God, help us now, that we may say,
'We will welcome our God today!'

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Prayers of intercession

Bathed in starlight, we pray to the One who created all things, saying,
Show us your child, O God,
For we observed a new star at its rising and have travelled far, bearing gifts.
Make your wisdom in its rich variety known through all faithful people,
and give your holy church grace to bear the gifts of truth and love to all your children on earth.
Show us your child, O God, For we walk together in faith.

Give your justice to the nations and their leaders,
and give your mercy to all whose decisions
affect the peace and well-being of the world.
Where we have power ourselves,
open our ears to the cries of the weak, the poor, and the needy,
and open our hearts to answer their call.
Show us your child, O God, For we walk together in hope.

We pray for the world around us,
for the many who continue to suffer and call out for help:
for those without enough to eat;
for those caught up in violence and political uprisings;
for those picking up the pieces after a natural disaster;
for those desperate to find work to support their families.

We also pray for family and friends who are suffering:
those struggling physically or emotionally,
those working to overcome mental illness;
those facing challenges at home or at work;
those grieving the death of a loved one.

We pray for Your church around the world,
that it would be a living demonstration of Your coming kingdom:
offering hospitality to all,
ready to help in times of need,
showing love to friends and enemies alike,
seeking to live in peace with all.

Bless this community, that in your light we may each become a servant, one to the other.
Bring us together in story, joy, and sorrow;
and let every daughter and son who comes among us find kinship in this place.
Show us your child, O God, For we walk together in love.

Have mercy on those among us
who journey in sickness, fear, or any kind of trouble.
Meet them on your road with rest, peace, and good cheer.
Show us your child, O God, For we walk together by your side.

We remember those who have died and all who mourn.
Your star goes before them. Show them your child, O God,
For they have travelled far to be with you.

Dear God, with longing and thanksgiving,
knowing that you hold this world and all its children dear in your heart,
we pray today for the grace to receive your gifts, to lift up our eyes and look around,
and to offer back those same gifts to you and your world, with love.
Show us your child, O God,
For we observed a new star at its rising and have travelled far, bearing gifts.

To the One who is the road on which we travel, our companion along the way, and our journey's end, we pray in boldness and confidence through faith in Christ Jesus, who taught us when we pray to say:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Brightest and best R&S 183 (second tune *Epiphany*)

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Cold on His cradle the dewdrops are shining;
low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;
angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker and Monarch and Saviour of all.

Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom and offerings divine;

gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
richer by far is the heart's adoration,
dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Reginald Heber

Blessing

Star child, wanted and welcomed by the humble,
hated and hounded by power-seekers:
refuge and refugee, we love you!

Apple of God's eye, cherished and chosen by Kingdom-travellers,
rejected and ridiculed by the earth bound:
sacred and scarred, we honour you!

Light of the world, tended and treasured by the pure in heart,
shadowed and shunned by the deceitful:
peerless and pierced, we exalt you!

And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen