

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“The Peaceful Resistance of Wisdom”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, January 5, 2020

Isaiah 60:1-6

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
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;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A 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 2:1-12

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

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

Let us pray. Loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to You, and to the power of Your Spirit. We pray that Your Spirit would take whatever words or images that we have within us. Our joys and our concerns. That Your Spirit would take the words we hear read from Scripture and offer in song and in prayer. And the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. That Your Spirit would take these words, touch them, bless them, and transform them into the

word of Christ. And that word would be our word from You. The word that we need to hear. A word that might comfort, or might challenge us. But let it be Your word. Not mine. Not the Scriptures'. Not our songs, and not our prayers, but the word of Christ. And let that word live and grow within us. And may it guide us. Like a star on a night. Until we know it's You. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

I start out today with a bit of a confession. I never imagined being alive in the year 2020. I can remember as a young man wondering about the millennium. Living into the year 2000 I'd be 35 years old, would I make it? What would it be like? And now it's 2020, and I'm 55. And I'm wondering, what's going on? And then I realize that in October, our daughter will be 30. This chunky little onesie girl who used to dance around in front of the television, terrorizing her baby brother, is now 30 and married and owns a house. And oh my Lord, it goes by so fast. But it's a new year. A new decade to the page from the prior has officially changed. And now, here we are. And so, like many people, the first thing I thought of as I watched the celebrations of the new year on the television, was I wonder what resolutions I should come up with for 2020.

Now, in the past, my resolutions have always been a little-- let's say optimistic. I want to weigh 150 pounds [laughter]. Not only do I want to run a marathon, but I want to do that triathlon thing in Hawaii, the Iron Man, where they swim for like five miles and then bike ride for over 100 and then do a marathon. Cause you know, I could do that. I can barely swim 15 minutes before I cramp, but I can do that. And I remember that there were times in my life where I wanted to be super successful, and I wanted to have a Jaguar, and I wanted all my clothes to be custom-made, and my shoes to be Italian leather, and on and on and on. That these were my goals and objectives, and this is what we need to do. And now at 55, I kind of stop and think, maybe that's not the best kind of resolution to have, maybe it's time to let go of a few things. And if you're part of my household, you have the opportunity at the beginning of the year and usually one more time throughout the year to let go of a few things because one of the things that my wife loves to do is to take one of those big black garbage bags that's a gift of the city of Kirkwood, go into the house into the closets and ask, "Have you worn this in the last year? Because if not, it's going to Goodwill." She wants to clear the decks, get rid of all the fluff that's kind of jammed into the house, whether it's clothes or other useful objects and head off to Goodwill to make a fresh start. That's not a bad resolution, although, at times, it makes me quite nervous to see her heading towards my closet and I'm not there [laughter]. But you get the idea.

There are times in our life, like the cusp of a new year and new decade, where it's almost like it's stopping us and inviting us to say, "Okay, how are things going? And where do I want to go in the future?" The passage gives us some hints, and it's not to have a thousand more followers on Twitter or to have more posts on Facebook. It's not to be more successful or richer or cuter or more well dressed or to have a bigger home or-- whatever the world says is success, the scripture, especially today's, is not pointing us in that direction. Instead, it's pointing us what I believe is in the opportunity direction. To pay attention to what I want to call the softer elements of wisdom. Because think about it, what's happening in this passage? Three wise people or more - we don't know the exact number - come from the east because they followed a star. There's a special hospital on the campus of Mercy on Ballas for people who follow stars. It's called the psych hospital, and you can go there for 72 hours, even if you don't want to because it's kind of weird to follow a star. Tell me, what's your goal this year? Well, things are going pretty good at work, but I'm going to pay attention to the stars and see what happens. What? But that's what our passage talks about. And then it talks about having a dream, that the wise men were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod because if they do, Herod's going to find out who the Christ child is and have him killed. And so instead, the dream tells them, "Go home a different way." And they pay attention to that dream, and they go home a different way. And as we'll learn, Joseph, the husband of Mary and the father of Christ also has a dream and takes Mary and the baby Jesus to Egypt because in the dream, he too was warned. Do we pay attention anymore to dreams? Do we trust that the spirit of God speaks to us sometimes in dreams? And then finally, we have the whole point of the journey, this baby in a manger with his mother, Mary, and we're assuming with his father, Joseph. A child. A baby. Cute, helpless hungry, needy, not able to rule, not able to do anything but smile and cry and maybe be happy and make those faces that they make that capture our hearts and melt us, and that the creator of the universe decides to show up as a child, a baby. So we have stars and dreams and babies as our guides or as those things that we can pay attention to and honor as life is lived in the year and decade ahead. I, for one, find it somewhat easy to trust dreams.

I became a Christian because of a dream, and I entered into the ministry because of a vision that occurred. The dream was of the child who ran in the rain, in the dark, in the thunder, got to the edge of a cliff, jumped, and immediately was grabbed by hands that came out of a cloud. And as someone not raised in the church and without any faith, I began to accept the truth that there's a God out there who cares. And in some sense, my life since then has been a perpetual learning about what that moment was. I went into ministry because I asked at the breakfast table one morning, "Yo, what do I do with my life?" thinking that I needed to make money and provide for my family, I needed to help others, go to grad school, become a counselor, etc., and my wife said, "I

think you're asking the wrong question. The question is, "What does God want you to do?"

My stole with the sunflowers was born because I saw weeds that were turned into sunflowers because a light had stopped on them for a moment, and I thought, "Oh, I should preach." And I remember a time when I was little when a conversation that my mom and dad were having about what they should grow in their greenhouse. I think it was in the summertime. I remember it was really warm. And my dad was telling my mom that he thought they should fill the entire back greenhouses that they owned with poinsettias. And my mom was like, "No, we can't do all of it. That's crazy. We'll never sell them all. We've got to just keep doing the carnations and the poinsettias and the mums like we've always done." And my dad said, "No. I think we should do poinsettias." And so he won. They did poinsettias, and unbeknownst to both of them, they had one customer come in one day and say, "I'll take every one of them," because he had a huge business and he wanted to give gifts to all of his clients, and he literally took them all. In a sense, my dad trusted that little whisper that doesn't make any sense.

We see the ways of the world--fear, questioning, power. We need to go destroy others to make ourselves okay. But if we pay attention to this passage, we learn that, for Christians, we can trust the subtle intuitions, the stars, the dreams, what it's like to be a child, to be more helpless, to be more vulnerable, to allow others to care for us and tend to us, to be softer in this year and in this decade ahead. And for me, this all led to a sort of pointing towards what Paul wrote to the Colossians. When I think about being softer and more open to the subtle whisper of wisdom that's available to all of us, when he wrote as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another. Forgive each other. Clothe yourselves with love. Let peace rule in your hearts, and let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." He doesn't say go and do all the things that the world expects. Instead, he's talking about the quality of our existence as those who love Christ and are loved by Christ.

Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, all of these are things the world so desperately needs and not just the world, but each of us. And to me, the invitation of this passage is to realize that the light of Christ lives within us, the presence of Christ is within us, and that the softer nudgings or invitations or encouragements we can trust, because if we are the body of Christ, then maybe it's okay for us to learn from a child, a baby, about how it is to be in the world. Maybe in the year ahead, we can all be softer towards each other and ourselves. Maybe we can let the light of Christ shine even brighter by being so. Amen.