

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts and minds be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, for you alone are our rock and our Redeemer, amen.

Our Old Testament lesson for today comes from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 60, verses 1-6. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

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 up on 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.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD:

THANKS BE TO GOD.

And our New Testament Lesson is from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 2, verses 1-12. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

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 have 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 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.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD:

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Growing up around here I was fortunate to be involved in some community theater at the Pendleton Playhouse. I did summer theater camp, and I was in *Charlotte's Web*, and one December I went and saw some of my friends in "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." Some of you might know this play or the book on which it's based. It is the story of a church Christmas pageant and it is the story of one particular family's participation in this pageant, the Herdmans. The Herdmans are a group of riff-raff kids who are the bullies at school and always in trouble. They are unpolished, experienced in expletives, and basically started coming to church because they heard there were snacks. Pansy always said if the food is good you'll remember! So, the church is organizing the Christmas pageant with all the kids and it becomes apparent in the first rehearsal that the Herdmans have no idea about the Christmas story. They have never heard any of it. So, the parent in charge of rehearsals begins to read it. Well, when they get to the part where the angels appear to the shepherds in the field Gladys Herdman jumps up and yells, "SHAZAAM!" Because she feels that something like an angel appearance deserves a special exclamation. And the Herdmans also get hung up on Herod. They would like to know where they can find this King Herod fella so they can properly beat him up for being so mean.

Ah the Christmas story. We retell it each year. In bits and pieces each Sunday of Advent, lighting the wreath to show how the light of the world came to us. Laura told the story to our children during the Christmas Eve family service. We tell it in Sunday school and as we make gifts on gift day. We tell it to our families, in our

homes, using Advent calendars and talking about our family traditions. We tell it with our children as actors wearing sheepy faces and with dishtowel shepherds. The Christmas story, central to our faith, is retold over and over for remembrance. Just like when we gather at the communion table for remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for our salvation, we tell the stories of our faith like the Christmas story. It brings us closer to God, draws us nearer, tethers us to the core of our faith. That God with us, Immanuel, came to earth to bring us new life.

We feel things when we tell or hear the story of Christmas, or like our Scripture for today when we hear this bit about the wise men from the East and King Herod. We feel solidarity with the Herdmans. We want to beat up on Herod and we want to cheer on the wise men. We think "Whew!" when they return home by another way and the drama subsides as the evil plans of Herod are thwarted for awhile. It is dramatic, this story and Matthew gives us some great details. The wise men come to Jerusalem and they ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Not only are they looking for another king, but they have proof, they have seen a star and they want to offer worship! When King Herod heard this, he was frightened. And he inquired of all his most trusted advisors, the scribes, the Pharisees where the Messiah was to be born. Herod is frightened, he gathers evidence and then he plots. Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he says, "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."

Herod so easily, so smoothly manipulates those “wise men” into doing his leg work and finding the Messiah. As we hear this we are thinking, vile Herod. The light of Christ, the beacon of the star, exposes Herod’s sin, his pride and his fear. Herod would like to seek this child out, destroy him and go on about being king and having people worship him. Herod is frightened that he is not the master of his own life, as he believed.

We are so quick to jump in with the Herdmans when we hear this story. Boo Herod! Where is he? Let’s give him what he deserves! Yet we, like Herod, claim mastery over our own lives. We are frightened that our pride will be exposed. We are afraid that the light will show us for what we truly are and there is nothing we can do about it.

We rebel against God, we hide from our Creator, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We try to illuminate our lives from other sources, we fumble with these dim lights thinking we’ve got it all together. And we do it all with the finesse of Herod manipulating the wise men. We do it without even knowing what we have done. We are afraid that the light of Christ will show us for what we truly are and there is nothing we can do about it. And that is exactly what happens.

Christ illumines us from the inside out, exposing our pride, our fear, that which we have done that we know opposes God’s will and those things we have left undone which we know God asked of us. Christ exposes us with the light of God’s unchanging love. The one

who created us, now comes to redeem us, knowing us full well and loving us still.

In a manger, as a baby, he was not what they expected. Jesus came, upsetting it all. And now again, Christ comes to us, illuminating who we are, choosing us still and offering us a different way. When I was a young adult volunteer in Belfast, the story of the wise men resonated with me. Having been warned in a dream...they left for their own country by another road. As a mission volunteer I spent a year living in the most impoverished part of North Belfast. I worked alongside folks who ached daily for peace and reconciliation and labored each day to bring God's peace to earth. People like the volunteers at the 174 Trust who organized social groups for people with disabilities who often could not safely leave their homes, the workers in the afterschool program who walked to pick up kids from school whose single parents were still at work and then helped them with homework and played games and the members of Whitehouse church whose church building had been destroyed in an arson attack and they now opened their doors each week to over 30 different groups and programs from both Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods, many cross-cultural. I could not return home by the same way. I had been so changed by what I had seen I had to return home by another road. (seminary) Like the wise men, who went, and ahead of them the star that they had seen at its rising until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were overwhelmed with joy. They knelt down and gave offerings and worshipped the child.

Today we at Fort Hill Church can be overwhelmed with joy. For the God who loved us, created us, knows us, and redeemed us

through Christ Jesus, comes to us still. Jesus, the beacon and guide for our lives, illumines from within and through the power of the Holy Spirit and renews us and challenges us to go home by another way. God continues to seek us, saying Arise! Shine! Be radiant! Rejoice! For Christ who knows every dark space of your heart has broken it open and redeemed you. You are a new creation. Arise, shine for your light has come. No longer do you live in fear and sin, but now you live in the light. Arise, shine and offer your life as living worship to the Lord who sent his son as a baby to change us all. Arise, shine for there are still Herdmans out there who don't yet know that the light has come in to the world and the darkness cannot overcome it. Arise, shine and rejoice in the love of God that so changes us that we must return home by another way.

Lauren Simmons

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

January 3, 2010