

**First United Methodist Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana  
Lectionary Study Guide**

**For use the week of Dec. 31, 2018 – Jan. 6, 2019**

**Epiphany Sunday**

**January 6, 2019**

**Opening Prayer**

**Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.**

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

<sup>60:1</sup> Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

**Commentary**

The book of Isaiah is a compilation of prophecies. It does not present a sequential story or even an orderly set of oracles. Instead, it is a collection from various periods addressing different situations and composed by writers in different centuries. This reading from the later part of the book is set in the Palestine of Malachi's time. The overall mood is melancholy, which is not surprising since the people were still vassals of Persia, harassed by enemies, living in a ruined city, and facing harsh economic conditions. This is a prime example of an oracle that offers them hope and encouragement. The prophet urged, open your eyes and look around. The situation is not as bad as you feared. This passage is read on Epiphany (the manifestation of God through Christ in the world) because it speaks of God's coming to a beleaguered people to bring light and life and hope. It calls us to take heart because the glorious grace of God has come to dispel the darkness of sin and despair by performing a saving work. We are urged to rise up, catch the vision of a new day, and embark on the path to restoration and wholeness. It is not by accident that the Feast of Epiphany is set on January 6<sup>th</sup>, just as the days are beginning to lengthen and—even though weeks of cold and winter remain—a hopeful glimmer of spring is in the air.

## Reflection

Can we experience God's blessing even amid suffering and misfortune?

### Ephesians 3:1-12

<sup>3:1</sup> This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--<sup>2</sup> for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, <sup>3</sup> and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, <sup>4</sup> a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. <sup>5</sup> In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: <sup>6</sup> that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; <sup>10</sup> so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup> This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup> in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

### Commentary

Paul has been the recipient of a special vision into the mysteries of God's plan of salvation for all. It was not previously understood that not only the Jews were to benefit from God's grace but the Gentiles as well—that is, all peoples of the earth. This truth the Holy Spirit had revealed to Paul and other apostles, and he (or someone writing in his name) now made it plain to all. God bestowed on you Gentiles the same gifts, incorporating them into the same community of faith and promising them the same assurance of salvation provided to the Jews. It was Paul's special charge to broadcast this message, even when he was persecuted for it and imprisoned (verses 1-6). Though Paul humbly considers himself in the lower ranks of God's servants, he is nevertheless confident that God's grace and power have called him to make known to the Gentiles that God loves them too and has rich blessings awaiting them if they believe the good news. This has been God's plan from the beginning, but only now has the time become ripe for this mystery to be fully revealed. Christ has come, and Epiphany is happening now...and the church has the task of sharing the richness of God's wisdom, not only with the common people but also with the people of power in high places. The Christ who was present with God from creation has now, through his incarnation and manifestation on earth, made possible a direct, personal relationship with God to all who come to God in faith. The Epiphany has a purpose—not to awe or impress, but to invite us into God's loving presence (verses 7-12).

## Reflection

What epiphanies of God have been especially powerful in your life? How have you responded?

### Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>2:1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> '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.'" <sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### Commentary

In the church year, Epiphany is associated with the visit of the wise men, to whom the Eastern wisdom and the bright and shining star had made known the identity and startling significance of the Babe born in Bethlehem. The fact that Herod commanded that all children under two be killed to remove any possible threat to his rule, suggests that Jesus could have been as old as two when the Magi arrived to pay homage. This earth-shattering, history-changing event took place during the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), whose marriage to Mariamne, a member of the royal Hasmonean family, gave him some legitimacy in Jewish eyes. He was a crafty, vicious ruler, and the slaughter of children fits his ruthless reputation and is recorded nowhere except in Matthew. When they had first reached the area, the wise men paid a courtesy call on Herod, and he pried out of them information on the child and the star using a deceptive claim of wanting to pay his respects. Although the Magi had first believed Herod, they were warned in a dream of his true intent, and they decided not to report back to him. Instead they headed home by a different route. This is one of six dream references in Matthew, which is a motif that suggests God was at work in the wings to carry out the divine plan and purpose.

## Reflection

God is not mentioned but is working in the wings. How do we discern God at work in our lives?

## Responsive Psalter

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

- <sup>72:1</sup> Give the king your justice, O God,  
**and your righteousness to a king's son.**
- <sup>2</sup> May he judge your people with righteousness,  
**and your poor with justice.**
- <sup>3</sup> May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.
- <sup>4</sup> **May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.**
- <sup>5</sup> May he live while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
- <sup>6</sup> **May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.**
- <sup>7</sup> In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
- <sup>10</sup> **May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute,  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.**
- <sup>11</sup> **May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations give him service.**
- <sup>12</sup> For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.
- <sup>13</sup> **He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.**
- <sup>14</sup> **From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
and precious is their blood in his sight.**

## Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**