

Isaiah Chapter 60
 has a situation on its hands,
 one of dealing
 with difference:
 how to rebuild a society
 which comprised
 very
 different
 kinds
 of people.

The people who heard Isaiah's message in Chapter 60
 were returning home from Exile.
 About a hundred years before, the Israelites
 had been forced to leave their home
 and live in a foreign land
 under another king's oppression.
 But now,
 they get to go back.
 Back to their homes.
 and to their land.
 Back to following their own laws
 and living under their own leaders.

Restoration was at hand,
 and God wanted to make sure
 that they also went back
 to worshipping God.
 Properly, that is.
 So, starting a few chapters back,
 God gave the prophet Isaiah messages
 meant to direct the people back
 to appropriate worship of God.
 Through the prophet, God reminds the people:
 Don't profane the Sabbath.
 Don't oppress your workers.
 Assist the needy. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked.
 Care for the orphans and widows among you.
 Stop being so self-centered.

And in your newly rebuilt community, God adds,
also
include
outsiders.

Yes, God says that new people
will be joining the community upon its re-establishment:

“Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered” (56:8).

God even names the people,
who would not have been fully included in Israelite society before,
but who from now on will:

folks such as foreigners who join themselves to the LORD (56:3),
eunuchs who keep the sabbaths (56:4),
strangers who help feed the flocks (61:5),
and kings who come from far away (60:10).

God gives a new beginning to these people, too,
and therefore concludes,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples” (56:7).

To cap off this somewhat stern, didactic talk,
God paints Isaiah a picture.

It’s a picture of the Glory of God
shining bright:

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.”

The Glory of the Lord has both come and, God promises,
will continue to shine on the Israelites:

“the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.”

And this Glory, this Light,
is not only for the Israelites.

The image, remember, comes amidst God’s instructions
to include different people,
to gather together what is dispersed:

“Nations shall come to your light,” God vows,
 “and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Because this Glory, this Light, shines not only on Israel
 but on *all* people,
 it makes *all people* shine,
 including folks the Israelites might never expect.

“Lift up your eyes and look around;
 they all gather together,
 they come to you;”

says the Lord.

Because of this Glory and Light,
 sons and daughters will come from far away;
 wealth and abundance from foreign lands will arrive at your shores;
 people will use camels to bring themselves and their possessions
 into your land.

And these foreign people and their offerings? . . . God clarifies,
 “[T]hey shall be acceptable on my altar,
 and I will glorify my glorious house.”

The whole image is of a throng,
 a multitude,
 coming together
 to worship in God’s holy house.
 It’s a picture of diversity:
 many different types of people
 all gathering around and shining with the Glory of the Lord,
 which draws other, different people
 to the Light.

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It’s no wonder
 that the Gospel-writer Matthew
 drew on images from Isaiah 60
 when painting his picture of the magi
 and the birth of Christ.
 These soothsayers—“wise men from the East”—
 see a star at its rising;

they see a new Light, a fresh Glory rising in the sky,
and they come to it.

Later, in Christian art,
the magi get depicted as different races.
You've seen the images where one looks white,
one looks Asian or Middle Eastern,
one Indian or African.
The magi are one place
where diversity appears in the nativity.
In our traditional manger-scenes,
Mary and Joseph and Jesus
often look like the culture that made the art.
But the magi show the underlying truth
that the Gospel also belongs to
and attracts
people who do not look like us.

In their diversity,
the magi become the Christian tradition's way of affirming
God's promise about Jesus Christ:
"Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
[So] lift up your eyes and look around."
Witness the magi!
For with them in the house,
we have a picture of diversity:
many different types of people
all gathering around to worship the Glory of the Lord in Jesus Christ,
all shining with arrival of the Glory of God made flesh,
all beaming in the Light of the World that no darkness can overcome.

As the church today,
we are descendants of the magi.
If we had a part in the original creche,
it wouldn't be with Mary and Joseph the Jews;
we would belong with the magi,
foreign-yet-welcome intruders
who, having seen the star at its rising,

come, each Christmas and Epiphany,
to pay homage to the newborn King Jesus.

That is the light and shining we see
and celebrate today:
that Christ is born,
and Christ is our light,
and here we have gathered—
different types of people—
in this mysterious multitude and holy throng
called the Church.

Different kinds of people
all gathering together
to worship the Glory of God.
All having come to the Light of Christ.
People who don't look like you,
people you'd never thought you'd talk to or understand,
people with different opinions or backgrounds or ways of life than you,
all belong with that manger-scene
with you.

What's so compelling yet strange about the manger-scene
and about Isaiah's brilliant picture
is that difference is usually the thing people notice and consider.
And we have one kind of difference on display today,
one type of difference that we members of Christ's own Church
love to notice
and which typically keeps us separate from one another:
denominations.

Lutherans off Lynchester Drive; Methodists on Fordham Road.

Yet today, here we are:
our Lutheran and Methodist congregations
coming together to worship the Glory of God
and bask in the Light of Christ.
We at Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
and we at St. Luke's United Methodist Church
have come together across the difference of denomination!
Today, we are living out God's call to live with the other,

to look around at all the diversity in the stable
and see it as one.

Today, we are a living illustration of God's call in Isaiah
to arise
and shine
because the Glory of the Lord has risen upon us.

And not only in worship do we actively live God's imperative to arise and
shine.

We also reflect and beam out the Light of Christ
every time and every way
we gather together
and give to one another:
sharing the duties of hosting the homeless guests in CARITAS,
joining our teenagers in fellowship for Youth Group,
combining our children and volunteers
into the largest Vacation Bible School in the neighborhood.

They are small but significant ways that we
arise
and shine
and witness that the Glory of the Lord has risen and can rise
right here
along Hull Street Road.

These combined ministries remind us that we are all Christ-seeking magi,
and there are other, different magi in the house with us too.

And we are not the only magi seeking out the child.
Matthew, you may notice, never says how many wise men arrived;
maybe it was three, maybe it was more.

It's plural, so it was *at least* two.

Which means that the two of us—
our two congregations coming together—
are the *least* number of possible Light-Seekers.

Our manger-scene is still incomplete;
there are more magi out there.

There are other people and different pockets of our community
who belong together in our neighborly fellowship.

Some of them probably don't share as much as we two share in common,
but they too are seeking out a newborn King,

hoping to arrive at and bask in the Light.

So today, let us not only celebrate that we,
a diverse multitude of Methodists and varied throng of Lutherans,
have come to the Light.

Let us also heed God's word
to "Lift up our eyes and look around":
imagining new ways that we may all gather together
and gather others—different others—into the manger-scene with us,
that we shall not only *see*
but also *be*
the radiant Light of Christ
in our community.

And then, our hearts shall thrill
and we will continue to rejoice.

AMEN.