EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“A Thousand Ways”* Isaiah 60:1-6

 Matthew 2:1-12

Although I have been trying *not* to get ensnared in all of the hand-wringing drama surrounding the royal family in England, I will admit to being waylaid by one article. It was the one about Megan Markle being astonished about having to curtsey before the queen even when they were in the private residence, out of the public’s eye. She was surprised they actually take these things seriously.

As an American, I understand her incredulity. Curtsies and bows are not something we are accustomed to doing before another person. As a Protestant, even in church, this is not something I do…and I have begun to wonder about that.

One writer, the Rev. Liddy Barlow, writing for the journal, *The Christian Century*, recounts her own surprise when it comes to such things:

*Congregationalists don’t bow to anything* (she writes)*…We’ll stand up for hymns, but we make no other liturgical gestures: no genuflection, no kneeling.*

(She goes on saying:) *As an ecumenist, I’ve learned to preside at the Eucharist in high church Lutheran contexts. But the first time a friend talked me through the ritual I was utterly baffled. “I raise the bread, then set it down and make a deep bow,” she said. A deep what? The first time I attempted it, I felt off-kilter and self-conscious. The motion was foreign. And the theology was strange, too. Did I really believe in this? Was this something I could do?*

Those two questions are especially important for us to think and pray about. *Do we really believe in this?* And *is this something we can do?*

The two passages that were proclaimed for us this morning give us some guidance. First, in Isaiah, we are first asked to greet the glorious majesty of the Lord by rising up. We, who have been in darkness, are invited to rise to welcome the light of God—rising, not bowing, is to be our response.

Rise, so that we may fully see and receive the precious gift God is giving us. Rise and fully receive the light that is flooding the earth around us; flooding over and around us and all of our senses—like the *Chelsea Morning* light Joni Mitchel sang about, *“the light* [that] *poured in like butterscotch and stuck to all my senses.”*

This light of God that can “stick to all our senses,” writes Isaiah, is going to cause all people to have a break-through. All will be filled with a new light that will draw the whole world to itself—to God’s beloved people Israel. All will be drawn to the people and the land.

All people, the world over, will see and come running to the signs of life that light always signifies. The world will come to honor God’s new light in Israel. They will come with gifts, with treasure like the Queen of Sheba.

God’s light announces, it calls out to all, and apparently its very nature is an invitation; its very nature signals hope and a future.

So, although he was speaking to the ancient Israelites, Isaiah was speaking to a people a lot like us. Isaiah was speaking to a people who were returning from exile. These were the people who were coming back from Babylon after having been held captive for more than three generations. They were coming back to their homeland and a life of independence, self-sufficiency and plenty—things they had only heard about in Babylon in the faith stories and in rituals of their parents, and especially their grandparents.

They had been patient and faithful about the protocols and rules of their captivity. I have no doubt they returned to Israel believing that all would be well because of this. Because they had “paid their dues” in the form of faithfulness and patience, all was going to be well. They were going to come into a new life of uncomplicated clarity about the way forward—as individuals and families, as a community, and as a nation.

The reality was different. The reality was that their reward for their faithfulness and patience *was* their freedom and their return to Israel. However, to maintain their new life and independence, they were going to have to take on the hard work of rebuilding, and of forging for themselves and their families new ways, new paths forward.

Their good news was that God’s light was rising upon them and all around them revealing what the darkness had hidden: which was, that they were not alone, and neither are we, even though we, too have been in a kind of exile. We, and the whole world, are finding our way back after several years of putting aside most (if not all) of the habits and practices that used to be our lives.

All of the routines we used to follow were disrupted three years ago, and we are just now inching our way back to many of the elements of former times. However, in the interim, we must acknowledge the new practices we have learned and adopted. We must make room for some of the new ways of getting things done, and we, too, should acknowledge that we are not alone. We still have each other, but we also have many others who are also working and rebuilding their lives just as we are. We can learn from them, just as they can learn from us. And we can help each other.

Mostly, and this is the hardest part: we must also make peace with the ways in which our old lives will *not* be returning. We will also need to make peace with what has been left behind, and what we have learned about ourselves and others, and the ways we have dealt with the disruptions we have endured.

As I think about this, I find myself thinking of how the amazing the journey of the Magi in the second of this morning’s lessons from the Gospel of Matthew.

When we think about it, the journey of the Magi is wonderful, but it is especially surprising. Think about it: there they were, living in their own homes, in far-away lands they had come from. Then, each discovers something miraculous in their studies. Now, remember they were not in the same place to begin with. Somehow, they met up on the road. Each saw something that pulled them out of their studies, our of their homes, out of the powerful positions each held in their home country.

Matthew tells us that they thought they were going to find a new king, and so they had disrupted their own lives and come away. They had packed costly gifts to honor the new life they were seeking, and they had undertaken the journey into the unknown.

That is right: they knew they were looking for a new king, but they did not know exactly where they were going to find him. It was like they had launched themselves into the darkness, toward a distant light. They were in such darkness that they stopped to speak to Herod in hopes that he would guide them and give them light.

Matthew tells us that while Herod’s wise men could tell him where to find the new light, they did not go with the Magi to honor it. Instead of greeting the news with gladness, Herod and the whole of Jerusalem were frightened by the light that was dawning.

Happily, the Magi continued their journey. They found the child, and they did something unexpected for people as wealthy and in procession of such status as they were. Even before they presented their gifts, the Magi *“knelt down and paid him homage.”* [v. 11] They humbled themselves before the child they had found.

There is no suggestion of hesitation or confusion. A star had led them to a humble house and somehow, they just knew they were in the right place. And even though the place and the child and his mother were not in a palace, even though they were in surroundings and circumstances very different than what they were used to, the Magi—each and every one of them—bowed down before him. The deference they were feeling was genuine and profound.

I would like to return to the words of Rev. Barlow who wrote:

*I’ve never curtsied before a monarch, but back in the dim inherited recesses of my instincts, long suppressed by Reformation rigidity and American pride, there’s still somehow a longing to bow down. The example of the Magi shows that we need not kneel to those in formal power… But we also need not dispense with deference all together. With exceeding joy, we can bow down before the presence of the Divine wherever it is found.*

(The poet) *Rumi, perhaps a compatriot of the Magi, says that “there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” And so, in our own ways, with bent knees or with humbled spirits, we can bow before bread, before babies, before people who are poor. We can pay homage to the vulnerable and marginalized. We can kneel before an ocean wave, a tree in full color, a honeybee. We can prostrate before signs of God’s love and evidence of God’s work. One by one, overcoming our awkwardness and self-consciousness, in exceeding joy, we can honor what is good and holy. In our own ways, we curtsy still.*

We are in the beginning of the year, of course, but as the year progresses, and our faith journey together continues, I pray we will look for and humbly accept the many places where we will find God’s presence. I pray we will always journey toward God’s light that leads the way to righteousness and justice. I pray we will bow down—which is to say: I hope we will recognize when God is lighting our way toward God’s desire for justice, for compassion, and for a love that longs to touch all people.

Just as the poet declared: there are a thousand ways to do this. I pray we will turn toward God’s light and find all of them. Thanks be to God. Amen.