

## **Come, Let Us Adore Him: Ahead**

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – January 5 2024

Epiphany Sunday

**Readings:** Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12 NRSVue

**Reflection:** Psalm 72

**Greeting:** Let the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute; let the kings of Sheba and Seba present gifts. Let all the kings bow down before him; let all the nations serve him. Let it be so, because he delivers the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper. He redeems their lives from oppression and violence; their blood is precious in his eyes.

(Psalm 72)

**Prayer:** O God our Father, you have brought us again to the glad season when we celebrate and give thanks for the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Grant that his Spirit may be born anew in our hearts this day. Open our ears that we may hear again the angelic chorus of old. Open our lips that we, too, may sing with uplifted hearts. Open our eyes that we may see your true light. May we celebrate our Emmanuel, our God with us, as we celebrate the miracle of Christ's birth. Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace. Let there be goodwill to all as we celebrate Christmas. Help us as we reflect on the Preparations and the Passion of Advent so that we might embrace the Presence and Promise of the Christ who comes. May you bring us together to worship in Joy, remembering the comfort of Home as we prepare to look Ahead. Come, let us adore him, Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 72

*<sup>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. (Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 NRSVue\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 72, and we hear of giving thanks for God. That we can be thankful for all that the Lord has done. That we can always celebrate what is ahead because God will be

with us. The Lord helps those in need. What is it you are praying about as we reflect on the birth of our Savior? Who can you lift up in your prayers this week? How are you preparing for the coming year? How is it that you will come to celebrate the birth of our Savior this year?

**Prayer:** Eternal God, we praise you for your presence with us. You sent your light into the world to dispel the darkness. We pray you will help us to look ahead as we remember the birth of Jesus Christ, our true light. We thank you for your many blessings in this Christmas season. We seek you in our prayers this day. We lift up our many joys that we may celebrate with you. We lift up our sorrows that you may wipe away our tears. We lift up both the prayers we have spoken aloud together and the silent pleadings that we hold in our hearts. For we know that you are never far from us and that you hear every prayer we raise to you. May we know your presence in our celebrations and our sorrows, in both laughter and tears. May we remember that you are always with us. May you grant us hope, peace, joy, and love as we celebrate a child born and laid in a manger. May our hearts be overflowing with your steadfast love and faithfulness all the days of our lives. And it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible Updated Edition. Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 60, verses 1 through 6.

*<sup>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 in 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. (Isaiah 60:1-6 NRSVue\*)*

Our next reading is from Ephesians chapter 3, verse 1 through 12.

*<sup>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 in boldness and confidence through faith in him. (Ephesians 3:1-12 NRSVue\*)*

Our final reading is from Matthew chapter 2, verse 1 through 12.

*<sup>1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi 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 in the east 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 magi 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 in the east, 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. (Matthew 2:1-12 NRSVue\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This marks the very last message in our Advent and Christmas series. And we've come a long way. We started out by looking at our preparations for Advent. We looked at the passion that we have for Christmas. We explored God's presence with us and our presence with each other. We reflected on the promise of Christmas. We celebrated the joy of the birth of our Savior. We have discussed the comfort of home and what it means to keep Christmas with us. And now we look ahead. Because the next thing that we always have to do at the end of Christmas is to look ahead at what comes next. We do that with Epiphany as we celebrate the wise men coming with gifts for the Christ child. We can think about looking ahead in different ways. It is something we see in the various readings that we have today. In Isaiah, we have the people looking ahead to the wonders of what God will do for his people. Paul talks about

looking ahead to the good being done in sharing the gospel message with the gentiles. And in our gospel reading from Matthew, we have the account of the visiting magi or wise men after the birth of Jesus to see the Messiah. All of these accounts are looking ahead.

With Matthew, we see that these magi were looking ahead. We always talk about there being three wise men or kings or magi, but in reality, we only know that they had three gifts. We don't know how many of these wise men were actually traveling, but tradition now speaks of three to the point that we expect it in all of our art and our music. Now, I said they were looking ahead because everything about their journey would require them to be looking ahead. They are there not to celebrate a king sitting on a throne, but a future king. They visit and bring gifts for a child, not for a royal dignitary. They come to celebrate someone who has not yet taken the throne to be the king of Israel. They are instead thinking ahead to what they expect this child will be. That they had to plan ahead when they began their journey. They didn't know exactly how far they would need to go. They weren't sure what the destination would be for the trip. They wouldn't know where the star would lead them until they got there. I think about this sometimes with our own Christmas journey. Because they come and pay homage to this child with gifts. That this child is born to be king. They are honoring what is ahead, and they celebrate what will be instead of how things currently are. That this child is born to be great, but right at that moment is still a child. They honor what will be and not just how things are right then. They can accept that they are recognizing the future and not just a moment in time.

I thought about this with Christmas because Christmas is a time where we look ahead. We think about a child born and laid in a manger, but we remember what he goes on to do. That his birth is a marker for what will be. When we get to the end of the Christmas season, we do start thinking about everything that comes next. We have just passed on into a new year. We are about to begin taking decorations down, if you haven't already. We are about to leave Christmas behind. And we look ahead to what else we have in store. Soon there will be Lent and then Easter. That we will have Pentecost. We will have various celebrations throughout the year, through the summer. We will circle around to Thanksgiving and then all the way back around to Advent. The question that we are faced as we look ahead is, how are we going to face the future with Christ? And that's an important question for us to ask, because it is one that we have to think about as we enter into this new year. What are we going to celebrate in this year to come? What is going to be our focus as people who live a life in Christ? What is it that we will do to demonstrate our love of God and the love that we have for our neighbor? How is it that we will let others know what a life in Christ looks like? What will it mean for us to be a light in the darkness?

The thing is that when Isaiah talks about the light ahead, it is that people will gather to that light because they will find hope in the light. That even in the midst of great darkness, dawn still breaks forth. And that people come to honor the light. And we remember our true light is Jesus born on Christmas Day. Our Emmanuel, our God with us, to be our light always and forever. Something that Paul celebrates as the driving force behind his mission, celebrating Christ. Paul sees himself very much as a servant of Christ, that he will do whatever he can to make sure that people know the message, that people will find the light. That Paul

discusses the way that he is a servant of the gospel. He has become a servant of Christ, hoping to bring the light to the gentiles. Paul desires to bring hope to people. Paul sees himself as the very least of all servants, but knows that even the very least has purpose in God's kingdom.

One of the things about looking ahead is that we have to be willing to expect the unexpected. I know that can sound cliché at times. But what I really mean is that we have to be willing to accept that God may move in unexpected ways. That God can take the ordinary and make it extraordinary. That we can see God in the smallest and humblest of places. If the magi had not been willing to accept what was ahead, they would have never visited Jesus as a child. They would not have celebrated simply finding a child with his mother. But they were willing to accept what God could do in the future and let it be special to them. That when they find Christ, they offer gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Not to a child in a palace with attendants. Just a young boy and his mother in little old Bethlehem. They come to look ahead. They accept the future that God can guide. That they celebrate a king that will be and all that will come with it. That he is not powerful right then. But they accept that God works in unexpected ways. That with God, anything can happen.

I feel that we need to be prepared in the same way for the future. That we need to be prepared in this coming year for God to make anything happen. That we need to be like those magi. We should be accepting what we find when it comes to us and celebrating it. Instead of constantly thinking that things aren't the way they're supposed to be, we should be looking for Christ in every situation we find ourselves in. That we should not just look at what is, but we should look ahead to what could be. That we accept that God can bring purpose from anything. And that we should celebrate the moments that we have that we may serve Christ. And so, in this coming year, I pray we all look ahead. That we prepare ourselves for a future in which Christ is there with us every step of the way. That we may celebrate our Emmanuel every day. Because we will always know that God is with us. So come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

**Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A special note, I will be on vacation next week, so there will not be a mailing again until the service for 1/19/2025.

### **Our Next Series – Transformed**

This series is a 7-week series about transformation. Each week will look at a different person from the Bible that was transformed by God. Each one tells a unique story about God's love and grace that are there for all people. Each person's tale of transformation gives us insight into how God can heal our brokenness. And each gives us hope that we may all be Transformed through a life in Jesus Christ.

1/19: Abraham & Sarah    1/26: Jacob    2/2: Zacchaeus    2/9: Paul

2/16: Moses    2/23: Elijah    3/2: Jesus

#### **Neoga Grace UMC**

752 Walnut  
PO Box 610  
Neoga, IL 62447  
(217)895-2809  
Worship 10:30am

#### **Toledo UMC**

Madison & Ohio St  
PO Box 267  
Toledo, IL 62468  
Worship 8:15am

#### **Etna UMC**

2799 Etna Rd  
Mattoon, IL 61938  
Worship 9:30am

Rev Camron D St.Michael  
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