Matthew 2.1-12; Isaiah 60.1-9
Wise men or magicians?

Today we're celebrating Epiphany. With the magi we're celebrating the appearance of the star, the Light, the birth of Jesus. The Greek word, as Sam has already said, means *appearance, revealing* or *manifestation*, as in God being made manifest in the human infant and person of Jesus. As in the appearance and shining of the star that led foreign men to Mary and Joseph's home where they worshiped the child Jesus. As in the Light of God shining into Jerusalem, radiating Light to the world beyond the City of God.

After four weeks of waiting in Advent, waiting in the cold and dark of winter, we're ready to celebrate Epiphany! We're ready to celebrate the light, the lengthening of the days, and even more, the coming of the Light of God in the person of Jesus, the Christ. After the drama of Elizabeth's then Mary's unexpected and impossible pregnancies, we're delighted that Jesus has been born, and we want to bask in the Light and brightness of the shining star. We're delighted that the birth happened without further incident. In the Gospel of Luke this new and young family couldn't find a place, except in a barn with the animals. But in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and Joseph and Mary have a place. The genealogy that opens the Gospel of Matthew gives Jesus a place, a place in the center of the Hebrew people—past, present, and future. And when the magi show up to visit the family, they come to Mary and Joseph's home. We're delighted to be welcomed into their home…no mention of a stable this time. With the magi, we're delighted to worship this new king.

With Isaiah and the people who waited in dark times and in dark places, we celebrate the coming of the Light. With Mary and Joseph, we celebrate the end of waiting and the beginning of Incarnation. But the celebration of God's Light shining, for both Isaiah and

Matthew, doesn't end the dark or make things suddenly perfect or trouble-free; rather, the celebration is a kind of sanctuary, a declaration that God's promises and prophecies are, even now, being fulfilled and will continue to be fulfilled. Isaiah 60 opens with beautiful poetry, words claiming this fulfillment of Promise:

> Get up! Shine! For your light has come!
> The Presence of the Eternal has shined on you!
> … And nations shall walk by your light,
> Kings, by your shining radiance.
> Lift your eyes and see all around you…
> Then you will see and you will glow…

Isaiah is celebrating the Light, celebrating God's Presence. Isaiah has lifted his eyes and sees the Light of God in the world. Not because all the exiles have been returned, nor has the restoration of Jerusalem been particularly successful. But that doesn't keep Isaiah from looking up, looking around, and *seeing* what God has done, what God is doing, and what is possible with God. Isaiah *sees* shalom and joy and glory and Light in Jerusalem. Isaiah sees God ruling, not waiting for another davidic king to rule, not waiting for the Messiah to rule, but God ruling now, God ruling eternally. In the Kingdom of God that Isaiah envisions, not only is God royalty, but the entire nation is sharing and enjoying the status of royalty. Isaiah sees a democratic kingdom where *all* are kings and *all* are priests. In this Kingdom that Isaiah is seeing, foreign nations come to Jerusalem, good news for Jerusalem and for the nations. Because God's Light is shining, because God is on the throne and ruling in God's Kingdom, nations come "bear[ing] gold and frankincense."

It is surely this image of other nations coming to the Light of God that Matthew had in mind as he described the birth of Jesus. Matthew tells us that men from the East followed the Light, bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The wealth of the nations *has* come to the Light.

We know the story of the magi well. Maybe we know it too well. For example, we typically tell this story with three men, but Matthew never tells us how many men there are. Likely we say three since there are three gifts named we assume a gift to each man, forgetting that maybe there were two. Or seven, an equally good, biblical number! Or maybe dozens of men.

And I don't know about you, but when I imagine the wise men, the image of sages comes to mind, kindly grandfathers, men who've devoted their lives to God, like in a monastery. But "wise men" really isn't an accurate translation of the Greek word. There is a Greek word for wise men, sofou.j, related to the word *sophia*. But these men are magi, ma,goi.... Magicians. People who do magic. Astrologers, dream interpreters, sorcerers. They're educated, literate men, sometimes serve in political offices and courts, sometimes as priests. But not priests in the Hebrew temples. And their religion isn't Judaism or Christianity.

The men have come from the East. Biblically the East does represent the place of wisdom. But the East is also the place of Hebrew exile. And Israel's conquerors have come from the East. The East represents resistance to the West, resistance to Roman imperialism. The arrival of these magicians into Jerusalem disturbs King Herod. We tend to assume Herod is troubled by their arrival and their news for purely selfish reasons and interests. But if conquerors have historically come from the East, doesn't Herod have reason to be disturbed, not only for himself but also for the people in his charge? He's responsible for national security! No? And if there are east/west tensions and these men from the east come to the current king, saying they want to worship the new king of the Jews, doesn't King Herod have reason to be troubled? Doesn't it make sense to us that King Herod would

be concerned, wondering whether they're really coming to bow down, to submit to a western king, or wondering whether they're planning an act of terrorism? Homeland security was most certainly asking how it was they crossed the border without being on a watch list!

But v 3 reads, "When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." All of Jerusalem is troubled. However many men there were, they made an impression; their entrance into the city stirred and disturbed the entire city. When King Herod and the rest of Jerusalem look up, when they look around and see these foreign men they aren't seeing or experiencing Light in their city. And there's some irony for us in our context, particularly in this time in our history—these men came from the place we know as Iran and Iraq. If their arrival into Jerusalem doesn't disturb us, if their journey to the home of Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus doesn't trouble us, we should at least take note of it, notice that it is not an ordinary or comfortable event.

Whatever the response of Herod and Jerusalem was to these Eastern magicians, to these foreign wise men, Matthew, echoing the prophet Isaiah, is asking us to lift our eyes, to look all around and see. The birth of Jesus is a political event, an international and cosmic event. It isn't a neat, comfortable event confined to a temple somewhere in the distance. The birth of Jesus disturbs King Herod, disturbs heads of state. It disturbs and troubles political and social and religious systems. And, the birth of Jesus brings together the most unlikely people. Consider that the birth of Jesus brings foreigners, even potential political enemies, to worship this new king of the Jews. The first ones to bow down before Jesus were not the Jewish people, but men from the east with their foreign religions and foreign gods. They, strangers and aliens, men who practiced astrology—an art forbidden by Hebrew law—were the first to recognize the coming of God's Light in Jesus.

Isaiah 60 v 11 reads, "Your gates shall always stay open -- Day and night they shall never be shut -- To let in the wealth of the nations, With their kings in procession." Jerusalem's gates... and Bethlehem's gates were certainly open on that day. Jerusalem's gates will always be open, not because we open them and keep them open, but because God opens them. Because God's Light shines and people who look up see the Light. Follow the Light. The gates into God's Presence and dwelling place are always open. God let's people in that King Herod, and Jerusalem, and we would never let in! But God's Light cannot be contained. God's Light shines and burns bright; it cannot be hoarded.

> Arise, shine; for your light has come,
> and the glory of the Lord *has* risen upon you.
> For darkness *will* cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;
> but the Lord *will* arise upon you, and God's glory *will* appear over you.
> Lift up your eyes and look around....
> Then you will see and be radiant;
> your heart will throb and thrill*;*
> because the abundance of the sea will be brought to you,
> the wealth of the nations will come to you.

God's Light burns bright, Light that cannot be controlled or diminished. Nor will it be confined by our expectations and assumptions. God's Light shines in *all* places. God's Light shines on *all* peoples. God's Light is infinitely comforting and equally disturbing. It exposes our humanity and those things we'd rather keep hidden. It shines through human distinctions, through human boundaries, through human exclusion. God's Light shines.

God's Light shines, in Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, in Elkhart. And we are invited, we are welcomed into the Light. Isaiah invites us to look up, to look around and see. And when we do, we find ourselves journeying toward the Light, accompanied by the magi. When we look up and see God's Light, we find ourselves entering into Jerusalem, the City of God, entering the gates that are always open to us who are strangers and aliens. When we

look up and see the Light, when we follow the Light, the journey takes us to the place where Jesus dwells, and we bow down. With the magi and their foreign gods and their forbidden art, we come to the Light with our own forbidden and foreign ways. And in the Presence of Jesus we are all welcomed, embraced. At home. "Overwhelmed with joy," we give our gifts, celebrating the Incarnation of God's Light in the person of Jesus. Celebrating that God's Light *is* shining, and *will* shine.