Worship Resources for January 6th, 2019—New Year’s Sunday, Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Narrative Lectionary: Day of Epiphany: Magi Visit, Matthew 2:1-23 (Psalm 96:10-13 or Psalm 11:1-3)

The first reading for Epiphany begins with words of hope for the people returning home. The light has come to the people who have been in the darkness of exile. However, as the prophet continues, he speaks of nations being drawn to their light. God’s light has shined upon the people, but now they are the light, for God’s light is in them. God will restore what has been taken from them, and all nations of the earth will see God’s glory through them, drawn to their light, and praise God’s name. The prophet uses the image of a multitude of camels coming from far away, bearing gifts of gold and frankincense for the glory of God, for all nations and peoples will see the power of God in the work of the people returning home.

The psalmist calls upon God to give justice and wisdom to the king in Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14. The psalmist prays for the new king to rule with justice and righteousness, and that peace may abound. They also pray that other kings will serve the king of Israel, for their king is on the side of the oppressed, bringing justice and restoring hope to the poor. The psalmist blesses the king of Israel, calling forth an image of other kings coming, bearing gifts and rendering tribute.

In the Epistle selection, this portion of the letter to the Ephesians speaks of the call to include Gentiles as part of the body of Christ, heirs of the same gospel. The writer (presuming to be Paul) speaks of the mystery of God hidden for ages that is now revealed in Christ, that God’s grace is for all people, Jew and Gentile. Through Christ Jesus, all now have access to God, and all can be confident of God’s grace through faith.

Matthew’s Gospel account is the only one that includes the visit of the Magi some time after Jesus’ birth, during the time of King Herod. The appointed king over the Jews by the Roman government is completely thrown off by the visit of the Magi, who say they are there to visit the newborn king of the Jews, whose star they observed at its rising. Herod has the scribes search through the scriptures, and they come across passages from the prophets speaking of a messiah, a new king. While Jerusalem has long been the city of kings, where the temple and the palace have been, Bethlehem was the birthplace of David, a city of shepherds. Herod tells the magi to go visit the child, but then to come back and tell him where he is, under the ruse of also paying him homage. The magi find the house where Mary and Jesus are staying, delivering to the child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; then return home by a different road, avoiding Jerusalem, after being warned in a dream.

The Narrative Lectionary also focuses on the Matthew’s account of the visit of the Magi, but continues after the magi have left. Joseph is also warned in a dream by an angel that Herod is searching for the child to kill him, and Joseph flees with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. When Herod realizes the magi are not coming back, he orders the death of all children ages two and under—very reminiscent of what happened in Egypt under Pharaoh before the Exodus. The gospel writer links a passage from Jeremiah, as the people were going into exile and Jerusalem was destroyed—weeping for a future that was taken from them, as a city mourns children who were killed. After Herod’s death, Joseph, Mary and Jesus return from Egypt, but Joseph is still worried about Herod’s family in power, and instead, heads north to Galilee, to a town called Nazareth to raise Jesus.

Psalm 93:10-13 sings praise to God who is the king of all nations, who will judge the world and its people. All of creation sings praise to God and is full of joy that God is the ruler of all.

Psalm 11:1-3 speaks of finding refuge in God. The wicked will find ways of striking the righteous and upright, but God is the source of refuge. The psalmist refuses to flee in the face of evil.

We enter this new year on Epiphany, remembering how it was foreign visitors—outsiders—who saw that God was doing something new. Herod and all of Jerusalem were frightened. To them, this new king, this new understanding came out of nowhere. Even for the writer of Matthew’s gospel, the looking back to the Hebrew scriptures came many years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. These weren’t clues left for people to find and point to the Messiah; rather, the understanding of who Jesus was came much later. In the same manner, God is doing something new right now, but it’s frightening. It’s different. And we may not see God at work until much later, when we see that God was with us all along, and that what God has called forth is different and good. Who are the outside voices showing us the way now? What light are others seeing, that we have been unable to see?

Call to Worship (from Isaiah 60:1-3)

Arise, shine, for your light has come!

 **The glory of God has risen upon us!**

For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples,

 **But God will rise upon us, and God’s glory will appear over us.**

The light of God is with us;

 **All the nations’ leaders will be drawn to the light of God.**

God’s light now dwells with us;

 **Come, worship God, and shine God’s light to the world!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Light and Love, we confess that we hide our light, we hold close our love. We fear our light isn’t strong enough, and we are afraid of having our hearts broken. We forget that the light is from You, it is not ours alone. We forget that the love You have given us is for all, and that Your love heals us when the world breaks us. Call us to shine the light You have given us, to share the love You have loved us with. For You are the Light of the World; You are the Love that never fails. In the name of Christ, our Light and Love, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

When our light grows dim, others shine for us. When we feel afraid and fragile, the love of God is shared with us. It is okay to rely on others, to sit down and rest. It is okay to admit that the work of Christ is hard, and that sometimes we need to be loved on, we need the light of others to keep going. You are loved and forgiven for being human. Now rest in the light of God, in the love of others, until you are ready to go into the world to do God’s work. Amen.

Prayer

Creator of the Stars of Night, You have made all the light in the universe, all the light beyond what we can see. When our own light is dim, fill us with Your light. God, You are Love, and Your love resides in each of us. When we are feeling the pain and sorrow of this world, may we know Your love more fully and deeply. When we notice others who are struggling, who are in the shadows and feeling unloved, may we be Your light and love to them. Help us to shine bright, and help us to love deeply. In Jesus’ name. Amen.