

SLD01.04.09 Epiphany, Wesleyan Covenant and Communion
Matthew 2:1-12, Isaiah 60:1-6
Emory and Trinity Presbyterian Churches, at Trinity
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“Wakey, Wakey, Rise and Shine!”

My mother was a morning person. Are any of you like that? Wake up all bright and cheery, singing camp songs or favorite hymns? All ready to chat and eat and celebrate the coming of a new day? When I was young, my mom would bustle into our bedrooms with her Ipana smile, all chipper and pert and ready for company, and sing, “Wakey, wakey, rise and shine!”

Used to drive me nuts.

Didn’t seem to bother my sisters much, but me, I take after my dad. Neither one of us cared to talk much before noon if we could help it, except maybe to God. And that was only because God was usually pretty quiet.

Every morning - “Wakey, wakey, rise and shine!” Took all I had not to throw things at her.

Now I’ll admit I may be wired a little sensitively to things like light and noise and touch and taste but still, I’m not the only one who isn’t delighted to see the first light of day. Ever hit the snooze button more than once on your alarm clock? Ever just turn over and go back to sleep? Not just everybody feels like rising and shining before their first cup of coffee. Some of us wish the darkness would linger a bit so we can sleep in. Others simply prefer the shadow of drawn blinds to the glare of the morning sun.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!? Well, for some of us, it’s just going to have to wait until after breakfast. The coming of new light just isn’t great news to everybody.

Take King Herod, for example. Certainly the announcement of a new light rising for Israel didn't exactly thrill him. No, indeed. Herod hadn't been all that wild about the *old* Light of the Jews, the law of Moses, placing, the way it did, more power in the hands of their cranky God than in his own. And now some *new* star is rising? Some kid purportedly born to be King of the Jews? Everybody going around quoting Isaiah shouting, "Wakey, wakey, rise and shine! God's Light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!" Took everything Herod had not to throw something at 'em.

For the last thing Herod needed was yet another power struggle, yet another challenge to his sovereignty, one more uppity somebody complicating his life. Now he was going to have to find the kid and get rid of it, which was not only going to waste his time but bound to make somebody mad. Still, you can't keep everybody happy. And better to nip this thing in the bud than wait around for the kid to grow up and off him after more people get attached to him. Martyrs are such a pain. Like punching clouds. All it does is throw your shoulder out. So lower your voice and draw the curtains – not only had Herod no interest in rising and shining for this new light of the Jews, he was determined to snuff it out.

How differently the wise kings from the east viewed the new light shining in their sky. Something about it grabbed their attention. Something about it captured their imagination and fired 'em up, made them want to learn more, to follow where the star was leading, even if it meant traipsing across the durn desert to unknown lands. Someone once said, "Man cannot discover new oceans until he has the courage to lose sight of shore." Well, something about the light of that star gave those wise men the

courage to move, to get going, to venture beyond the “temple of their familiar”¹ until they lost sight of the shore. Where they were going and what they would find, they could not be sure. But “Wakey, Wakey, rise and shine!” beamed the star to the magi. And so those pagan kings woke up from the dream of their understanding, rose up from the somnolence of their routine, moved out from the sphere of their familiar, and followed the shine of that star to wherever it might lead.

Of course, as you and I know, having heard the story a hundred times, where the star light led was to the Light of God, Jesus Christ - at this point a mere infant swaddled in the manger. Once they got there, the wise men might not have recognized God – certainly nothing in their wisdom would have suggested that God would enter the world as a helpless baby – but remember that they men were awake now, even from the dream of their own wisdom, and what do you know but that they recognized Jesus for who he was. And when they did, when they recognized Jesus as God, they did what everyone does in the presence of the HOLY, which is to offer back the best they have to give.

So you and I, where do we fit in this story? The glory of the Lord has risen upon *us*, right? As it does each year? Christ *our* Light has come, hasn't he? So how are we responding? Are we more like grumpy inconvenienced Herod or the courageous risk-taking wise men?

Well, more like the wise men, right?

After all, we're people of faith, always open to God's leading, ever ready to move beyond what we know, ever willing to risk the unfamiliar, consistently recognizing God's

¹ Title of Toni Morrison's book.

light in our midst, ever excited about its possibilities...and of course, always responding to God with the very best we have to offer. Right?

Or does the God's bright light sometimes not delight us? Do we from time to time hit the snooze button so we can sleep in just a little bit more? Is it possible that you and I sometimes prefer the shadow of drawn blinds to the glare of the morning Son?

Or say when the Light comes, you *do* rise and shine. Ever find it complicating your life? Ever find it challenging your authority, or those and that to which you give authority? Ever struggle with God for power over your time, your energy, your life?

Every year at Epiphany you and I arrive at the stable of Jesus' birth, led by the star of God's Light. And with so much more information than the wise men! The prophecies that foretold Jesus, the story of his birth, his ministry, his miracles, his boundary-blowing relationship with all who would follow him, his tragic death, the unfathomable, reality-rearranging mystery of his resurrection. All the wise men had before them were a shining star and a diapered king.

But I wonder sometimes if we don't arrive at the stable each year knowing somewhat less about the Christ child than the magi. Perhaps even less than Herod knew about what danger and disruption would be wrought by this babe in a manger. Surrounded as we are with communities and the accoutrements of faith – churches, traditions, sermons, books, experiences – that echo and spin that 2000 year-old epiphany, do we even recognize anymore the heart-moving, reality-rearranging light radiating from the manger, sent to turn the world topsy turvy in its values and our lives inside out with its challenge? I wonder.

And yet, there is in each of us a God-placed yearning to witness and receive and live out of that light, for all its danger and challenge. And so this morning I invite those of us who wish genuinely to grasp in our hearts the life-demanding, life-altering, sometimes life-shattering but always life-giving Light God sent to the world, to re-commit ourselves once again to that Light through the words of the Wesleyan Covenant. Through Jesus Christ, God promises to love and forgive us forever; let us, in return offer back to God the very best we have to give, which is, of course, ourselves.

In order to do so today, in order to recommit ourselves to God through Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit, we will join together in a ritual borrowed from our Methodist brothers and sisters called the Wesleyan Covenant Service. I was introduced to this Service at the retreat center where I've gone for the last ten or twelve years and have, for some time now, included it on the first Sunday of the New Year.

Wesley, unwitting Anglican founder of the Methodist Church in America, had a special appreciation for the deep and heartfelt need of Jesus' disciples periodically to recommit their lives to God. It was out of that understanding that in the year 1755, Wesley created the forerunner of the ritual we will use today.

But before we enter this covenant ritual, the words of which are printed on the insert in your bulletins, let me just say that for many of us, truly fulfilling this covenant may seem impossible. And so it would be, were it left only to us. But God's Light is generous, and God's Light is gentle; its first fingers on the horizon ever so deftly and gradually pulling the mantle of darkness away.²

² John O'Donohue, Anam Cara, A Book of Celtic Wisdom, HarperCollins, N.Y., 1997, p. 1.

So let us view the words of this covenant as a divine invitation to set our intention as best as we are able, to respond to the gift of Christ Jesus with the very best we have to offer, which is ourselves.

Friends, wakey, wakey, rise and shine! The glory of the Lord has risen upon us! Let us re-affirm together that through Jesus Christ, the One Holy Triune God is ours, and we are God's.

To the glory of God. Amen.