



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation
January 8, 2023 ♦ Epiphany Observed



This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time.

The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

If you are a guest with us today, welcome! If you are comfortable sharing your information with us, there are cards in the pew holders that you can use for that purpose (place them in the offering plate).

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Prelude

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“As with Gladness Those of Old” #159 (*alt.*)

**As with gladness those of old did the guiding star behold;
as with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright;
so, true Morning Star, may we ever more your splendor see.**

**As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed,
there to greet the holy Child, born to show Love undefiled;
so may we with willing feet never from your face retreat.**

**As they offered gifts most rare at that manger plain and bare,
so may we with holy joy, songs of praise our awe employ;
all our precious treasures bring, Christ, to you from whom they spring.**

**Holy Jesus, every day keep us in the gracious way;
And when mortal things are past, bring our cherished souls at last
where they need no star to guide, where no clouds your glory hide.**

We Come to the Table
Invitation

Liturgy by the Rev. Michelle L. Torigian

One: Here at this table and in this sanctuary, let the Divine Spark enter our lives.

Many: Let the Holy Light aid us in seeing the Christ in our midst.

One: The Brightness of Jesus the Christ will illuminate our way.

Many: The Radiance of the Christ will warm our hearts.

One: God is shining upon you!

Many: And God's light streams upon you!

One: Open your hearts.

Many: We open them to the brilliance of God.

One: Let us give thanks for the light and love of God.

Many: We praise our Creator with joy and thanksgiving.

Prayer

One: We enter this stunning space eager to experience the presence of the Christ. Notice the Christ in the cries of the children. Spot the Christ your neighbor's singing. Recognize the Christ in the laughter from the back of the sanctuary. The Christ is gleaming here, summoning us to share love and light as we greet our neighbors, share peace, pass the bread and cup, and love kindness across this earth.

On the night before Jesus died, when some were plotting to extinguish the Holy Light, warmth was shared between friends. Jesus took bread. In his blessing, he passed the Divine Glow to his followers. As he broke the bread, he reminded them to eat in remembrance of him.

Later that same evening, Jesus took the cup. He blessed it and invited his friends to taste from the cup of grace. "Do this, as often as you drink of this, for the remembrance of me."

Holy Spirit, may your Divine Glow bless this bread and cup. Warm our hearts made cold by a chilled world. May this meal inspire us to carry your warmth into our world. Amen.

Distribution of the Elements

You may open your Communion container right away and eat/drink the elements.

Interlude (*during distribution*)

SCARLET RIBBONS

Prayer of Thanksgiving (unison)

God of Light and Love, we cherish this table in this season when the nights are long and cold. Through this meal, the Christ, and our neighbors, our hearts have been warmed. May the comfort in our souls sustain us through winter and nudge us to create welcoming spaces for our neighbors. May this meal energize us to be kindlers of your love in the world. Amen.

Choir Anthem

“Do You Hear What I Hear?”

Shayne/Regney

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Said the night wind to the little lamb / Do you see what I see?
Way up in the sky, little lamb / Do you see what I see?
A star, a star, dancing in the night / With a tail as big as a kite.
Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy / Do you hear what I hear?
Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy / Do you hear what I hear?
A song, a song high above the trees / with a voice as big as the sea.
Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king / Do you know what I know?
In your palace warm, mighty king / Do you know what I know?
A Child, a Child shivers in the cold / Let us bring him silver and gold.
Said the king to the people everywhere / Listen to what I say!
Pray for peace, people, everywhere / Listen to what I say!
The Child, the Child sleeping in the night / He will bring us goodness and light!*

A Time for Children (10:30)

*ADVISORY: The livestream of the service continues during the Children’s Time;
if your child sits facing the Pastor their face shouldn’t appear on camera.*

Prayer of Preparation (sung, unison)

John Bell

Send out your light, Lord, send your truth to be my guide.

Then let them lead me to the place where you re - side.

(10:30) Children ages 3 and up may depart at this time for Sunday school.
Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.

Scripture Reading – Matthew 2:1-12 (*alt.*)

Lector, **Congregation**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, **"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."** ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ '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.'" ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"Who Would Think that What Was Needed" #153

This lovely tune, SCARLET RIBBONS, is not well-known; consider using the hymnal!

**Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision, that a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.**

Shepherds watch and sages wonder, monarchs scorn and angels sing;
such a place as none would reckon hosts a holy, helpless thing;
stabled beasts and passing strangers watch a baby laid in hay;
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.

Centuries of skill and science span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether with such progress we improve.
In our sense for sense and meaning, lest our hopes and humor fray,
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.

Offering

Text-to-Give: [844-334-1477](tel:844-334-1477)

Thank you for your gifts to our ministries!

You may also set up online giving at uccanoka.org or text your gift to the church using the Text-to-Give number above; both services are provided by Vanco. Thank you!

Offertory

Koki Sato

* Doxology

“What Child Is This?” #148 (v. 3 *alt.*)

**So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh, come join in jubilation;
The Holy Child, so meek and mild, has come with God’s salvation.
Raise, raise the song on high, the mother sings her lullaby;
Joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary!**

* Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

*The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).
We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.*

**Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy
kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our
daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not
into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**

Benediction

* Congregational Blessing

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” #144 (v. 3)

**Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.**

**Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us all from earth, born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king!”**

Postlude

Koki Sato

*You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time,
please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.*

Acknowledgements

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Sermon text

I know that the story of the magi coming to the manger is a popular one in our collective Christianity. It’s so popular that it grew beyond its Biblical boundaries into something wholly different. For instance: they aren’t kings, they’re magi. Wise people, not even necessarily men. It doesn’t even say there are three of them—they just bring three gifts. The White, Black, and Asian characters of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar aren’t remotely Biblical, but they show up in our nativity displays anyway. In countless churches we talk to the kids about gold, frankincense, and myrrh and maybe even gift-giving in general. But maybe we leave out the conspiracy to murder.

It’s there, you know. The story, certainly constructed to call back to the story of Moses and Pharaoh, is constantly on the edge of violence. Herod has heard prophecies of a newborn King, someone who he presumes is a threat to his power. When these sages from the east show up, star-following folks who have somehow divined what’s about to happen, he attempts to use them to figure out just where he needs to direct his power, and when the magi don’t report back with the location of the child, he orders the murder of all children in Bethlehem aged two or younger.

We leave *that* part out of our Nativity scenes. It’s too grim. Too rife with toxicity and evil. It isn’t warm and cozy like we like our Christmases to be. But it’s still there; we shouldn’t sing ***so bring him incense, gold, and myrrh*** without remembering that the backdrop of that gift-giving is a promise of violence.

The folks who wrote “Do You Hear What I Hear” probably didn’t ignore that hard stuff. They wrote this carol in October of 1962 in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis. It was written as a plea for peace (**Pray for peace, people everywhere!**) in the midst of the tangible, existential threat of war—even nuclear war. But of course most folks don’t know that; I didn’t know it until I looked up the song’s origin this week.

I don’t know about you, but it gives that song added weight. It was written amidst a threat of war, and we sing it today amidst a time of war in our world, one that many fear will spill outside of Ukraine’s borders. It’s a missile crisis all over again, as our country and its allies fear that if they make one wrong move, Putin will deploy nuclear weapons. (**Pray for peace, people everywhere!**) Amidst such threats, we sing our hope: ***The child, the child, sleeping in the night; he will bring us goodness and light!***

Light. That's the Epiphany thing: the light of the star that drew the magi to the manger. Light that foreshadows the name Jesus would be given: light of the world. Sun (S-U-N-) of Righteousness. Light to illumine the darkness that those of ill intent use to hide their plotting. Light to dispel the shadows of confusion and despair. Light to bring us warmth and clarity and hope. On Epiphany, we pray for light, even as in the song, we **pray for peace, people everywhere**.

I've noticed a trend, quite prevalent among my clergy friends and colleagues, but one that is spreading beyond that. When someone uses social media to describe something hard or tragic that is happening in their lives, I'm increasingly seeing folks respond with a simple statement: "love and light." That's better than "thoughts and prayers" by a country mile for more reasons than I'm going to tackle today, but as it's Epiphany, that light business is compelling. It's almost like a prayer that a star might burst into light once again to be our guide. To guide us to the place where Jesus resides. Light to illuminate the path upon which Jesus bids us tread. Light to show us the Way. Light to dispel the fears and anxieties that so often crop up in the night. Light to bring hope and courage.

By all means, we should **pray for peace, people everywhere**. But we have to take it one step further. We can't just pray for peace. I realize I'm making a particular theological claim here, but prayer isn't really about getting God to do things. Partly, that's because we put ourselves in a bind when those things we ask for don't happen. Rather, prayer is about US. It's about so many things, including opening ourselves to possibility, action, and a path toward being part of a solution. It's fine to **pray for peace, people everywhere**, but that prayer should lead us to be part of the creating of that peace. And how do we accomplish that?

Send out your light, Lord, send your truth to be my guide...

The Light shows us the way. The Light reveals the path to peace, the ways that the Spirit inspires us and motivates us to pray not just with our words, but with our hands and hearts and voices. We pray not so much that God will fix things, but that God will illuminate a path to us by which we can co-create that peace with God. A way for us to seize our God-given agency to bring about renewal and hope. That's Epiphany—a sudden, bright burst of insight that leads us toward peace and love. Love and light.

In the midst of the 1997-1998 school year, I was a graduate student at Boston University. It was the first time I had truly left the nest, inasmuch as I had gone to college in my hometown. I was terribly homesick, and because I could only afford to be a part-time student for tuition-related reasons, I had too much time on my hands. One of my professors, David Eckel, seemed to discern that—or so I've always believed—because one day, he told me that the Registrar of the BU School of Theology had just lost his graduate assistant, and since that Registrar was a native Nebraskan, he thought I might check it out. I appreciated the gesture, but in my then-state of mind, I wasn't terribly motivated to do anything about it.

Then, one day a few weeks later, I was cutting through the building where the School of Theology offices were housed. I distinctly remember thinking to myself, "I'm going to look down this hallway, and if the Registrar is standing there, I'll go talk to him. If not, I'll let this go."

You know where this is going, yes? The guy was standing in front of the seminary offices, and what's more, he and I were the only two people in the hallway.

I recall experiencing a distinct sensation that something beyond me had just gotten involved, enough so that it overcame my contrary inclinations. So I walked down the hall, introduced myself, and a few days later he interviewed me. It turned into a graduate assistantship—and eventually a second one—that almost entirely paid all of my expenses for my entire second year at BU. It gave me an additional community within the School of Theology (where I was not technically enrolled). It even contributed in its

own way to my own sense of call years later, as I seriously considered going back to BU for my seminary education.

Honestly, I don't remember if I prayed over that whole matter or not. Maybe that promise to myself was a kind of prayer. But in that hallway, it was as if the light of Epiphany came as an answer to prayer—and not because God made something happen, but because the Spirit illuminated something for me that enabled me to act in concert with that guidance to create a new, better, warmer reality.

I've already made one reference to a Styx song in this sermon, and that makes me think of another:

**Every night I say a prayer in the hope that there's a heaven
and every day I'm more confused as the saints turn into sinners.**

**All the heroes and legends I knew as a child have fallen to idols of clay
and I feel this empty place inside so afraid that I've lost my faith.**

Show me the way; show me the way!

Take me tonight to the river and wash my illusions away

Show me the way

Twice in my life, I've prayed for an outcome and received a gift of guidance, a light to reveal God's hopes and intentions for me. In both cases, I embraced that light and walked the path that was illuminated, and it changed everything for me. I confess that there are times in my life when I slide into a more overt agnosticism—and I'm being real with you here, I think that's true for everyone. The world is so hard that confusion takes over. But then I remember: I have experienced Epiphany. I've seen the Light. It's real. And though it was sometimes scary, when I trusted that Light, it made all the difference.

**Send out your Light, Lord, send your truth to be my guide;
then let them lead me to the place where you reside.**

Pray for peace, friends. Pray for Light. Pray for a star, dancing in the night with a tail as big as a kite to lead you to light and love. And then, when you see that path?

Walk it.

Amen.

◆ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ◆

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First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.