

Epiphany Sunday B
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
January 7, 2024

“Instructions for Living a Life”
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*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and God’s glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*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 on their nurses’ arms.
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.
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.*

*[Wise ones from the East] 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were*

overwhelmed with joy. 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.

~o~

I like poetry. Not so much the rhyming verses of Byron or even the sonnets of William Shakespeare. I'm more drawn to the free verse poetry of Walt Whitman or, better yet, Mary Oliver. Oliver's work is so relatable, so approachable. She writes about ordinary things, but seen through the eyes of a mystic. When she writes about her dog, or wild geese, or a waterfall, I can't help but see these ordinary things as extraordinary experiences of the Holy. Rather than transporting me to another time or another place to experience beauty and wonder and the divine, she invites me to feel them right where I am. Reading her work is, for me, nothing short of an epiphany – a revelation of the sacredness of the here and the now and those we share them with.

In her poem, "Sometimes," Oliver presents readers with "Instructions for living a life." She writes:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.¹

Today as we celebrate Epiphany Sunday, our texts from Isaiah and Matthew invite us to consider a new light that shines revelation on the world and a star in the Eastern sky guiding wise ones to the Christ child. And as we do, Oliver's words seem especially applicable.

¹ Mary Oliver, *Red Bird*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009.

“Pay attention,” Oliver writes. The wise ones in our story, likely Persian mages and adherents to the ancient monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism, paid attention. They searched the night skies for portents of significance and signs of change. The magi in our story, Zoroastrian priests, are said to have observed Jesus’ star at its rising. They paid attention to this omen and followed it, bearing gifts for the new king who was born.

“Be astonished,” Oliver writes. Overwhelmed by joy, the magi worshipped the Christ child, opening their treasure chests and presented him with gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

“Tell about it,” Oliver writes. While the story concludes with the magi returning home, we can only assume that an event of this magnitude would warrant retelling. Certainly, Matthew’s author thought so as they recounted the tale in their gospel account of Jesus’ life.

The season that we enter today, the season of light and revelation, the season of epiphany is about paying attention to the sacredness of the here and the now and those we share them with. It’s about allowing ourselves to be astonished; to sit with wonder, awe, and amazement; to worship. It’s about telling others about it in word and in deed, about sharing the revelation – the epiphany – with others that they too might, in turn, pay attention, be astonished, and tell about it. In just three short lines, Mary Oliver captures the very essence of the Season of Epiphany! But she applies them more broadly as instructions for living a life.

I do wonder how different our own lives would be if we allowed these three simple guidelines to shape our day-to-day. What would life be like if we paid attention – noticed the myriad small things that point to big things, to holy things in our lives and in our world? What would life be like if, instead of rushing past on the way to whatever seems more important, we stopped to be astonished, to sit in awe, to revel in wonder?

What would it be like if, instead of keeping it to ourselves, we shared with others how paying attention and allowing for astonishment cast new light on our moments and on our lives?

Might we find ourselves more grounded in the present; more open to seeing the small miracles of every day, more grateful, even optimistic, as we become affected by astonishment; more joy-filled and joyful as we gladly share what we've learned and experienced with those around us? How might putting these three simple guidelines into practice reshape our experience of the Season of Epiphany, our experience of the divine, and of others, and of the world?

Today, we begin the season of Epiphany. It's a rather short detour between the seasons of Advent/Christmas and the season of Lent. But it's a season of new beginnings and fresh perspectives and divine revelations. And it ends in just over a month on Ash Wednesday, February 14th. In these short weeks, I challenge each of us to implement Mary Olivers instructions for living a life: to pay attention, to be astonished, to tell about it. I think we'll be amazed at how following these three little instructions will yield big results in our lives and in the life of our community. And as we do, may we too arise and shine, for our light has come. Amen.