

## **God of Wonder and Light** by Patty Friesen

Isaiah 60:1-7, Matthew 2:1-12, Epiphany Communion Sunday, January 2, 2022

*Flora and Ulysses* is Kate Dicamillo's story of a superhero squirrel who writes poetry. Ulysses, a squirrel is supercharged by an unfortunate encounter with a vacuum cleaner. Of the many abilities that result, the most auspicious is that he writes poetry. Ulysses pecks out several exquisite lines of poetry at the typewriter, to the utter amazement of Flora, his human companion.

Flora's surprise arises from the miraculous exposition of a literate squirrel. But she is also astonished to be noticed, and even more surprised to become the object of someone else's delight. Flora lives largely overlooked in her world. Ulysses notices, and he is filled with wonder. He's confronted by the beauty of the world, sometimes by the overwhelming fragility and feeling of the world. "What is the word for that? He asks. Is there a word for the lighted windows of other houses? Is there a word for how his human friend, Flora looks when she sleeps? For the wind through the trees, or for a donut with sprinkles on top and cream on the inside? Or jelly?" End quote., (Fire by Night, p. 116)

Are there words for today's morning sunrise or other mid-winter beauty on this Epiphany Sunday? Isaiah scrambles for words to describe the amazing scene of the home-coming of all the children of God who have been in exile. God is making a way for all the people of the nations. They are coming out of darkness and coming into light. They are coming out of exile and coming home. They are coming out of mere survival to the abundance of the riches of the world - gold, frankincense and myrrh. "You shall

see and be radiant. You shall thrill at the sight and rejoice.” It is a procession of extravagance and awe to behold.

In Isaiah, God calls the people and animals to one another. A procession of humanity and animals - camels, goats, rams. “All are participants in God’s wonder. The procession itself becomes a sign of God’s wonder. God is the source of the wonder, but also the One to receive it, the One who gathered together this people. Each person is represented in this stunning sight - we were all in exile. We were all refugees. God called to us in the darkness and brought us together, to God’s own self and to one another through the gift of the new king, Christ the Messiah.” (p. 125).

This image is repeated in Matthew’s gospel. The magi come to worship and inquire of the new king in Jerusalem. Their first word, which is also the first word of any human character in the Gospel of Matthew, asks “Where?”—which is also King Herod’s first question (v. 4). One of the Jewish objections to the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah was that according to Scripture the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem (cf. John 7:42), while Jesus came from unbiblical Nazareth. In response, this chapter begins by declaring that Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem.

The magis’ inquiry about the “King of the Jews” is both a reminder that Jesus is the royal heir of the Davidic promises and an anticipation of his ministry proclaiming the kingdom of God and especially of the passion story in which he will be crucified as “King of the Jews” (27:11, 29, 37). The Magi represent pagans (Gentiles) who, though they do not have the special revelation of the Torah, come to Jerusalem following the light they have seen. Their goal is to “worship” or to “pay homage” to the new king. They have seen a star “at its rising”. The magi, and not the star, were in the east and followed

the star in the western sky to Bethlehem. Matthew is clearly describing a miraculous phenomenon directed behind the scenes by God, for the star remains stationary while they are in Jerusalem, then leads them not only to Bethlehem, but to the precise location of Jesus, where it “stood still” to mark the designated spot (v. 9).

The historical King Herod the Great was an Idumean who, backed by Rome, had established himself as king by military conquest of his “own” people. The populace, who wanted a king with Jewish blood who was not beholden to the Romans, resented his rule. Herod’s architectural and cultural achievements were indeed great, the renovation and enlargement of the Jerusalem Temple into a building of splendid proportions being only one of his extravagant projects. It is not the historical Herod with whom Matthew is concerned, however, but with Herod as a character in the story, who serves as a foil for the kingdom of God. When this Herod hears of the birth of the new king, he is “troubled” (RSV). Herod represents the resistance of this world to the divine kingship represented by Jesus. When “all Jerusalem” is troubled with him, this is not mere sympathy with or fear of Herod. Matthew is again looking ahead to the passion story and implicating Judaism’s capital city as a whole, not only its King Herod, in the rejection of Jesus’ messianic claim (cf. 21:5, 10; 23:37-38; 27:15-23).

In Isaiah, the servant is to be “light to the nations” (42:6; 49:6). It is the servant whom nations and kings will acknowledge (52:15). The servant will also be high and lifted up (52:13). In short, all that was said of the servant—first, of Israel as servant, then of the individual “servant Israel”—is here associated with Zion or the Holy City renewed from the earthly city of Jerusalem. Zion is to rise up; nations and kings are to stream to her light. This light is identified clearly with God’s epiphany: “the Lord will arise upon

you, and glory will appear over you.” It is the dawn of a new era that Christ’s coming brings where the former things are left behind and no longer remembered.

Communion is like this too - an ingathering of gifts and bodies, a homecoming meal. If we were high church, we would process in the bread and cup like gold, frankincense and myrrh. Pre-pandemic, the bread was freshly baked with warmth and love by Sarah Guenther and Edna Zacharias. Nowadays it is a dry wafer and yucky juice but let’s remember what communion used to be like, what it is meant to be like and will be like again someday soon. Warm fresh bread and delicious home squeezed grape juice are what represent the gifts Christ has brought for nourishment of our body and soul. Like the best Christmas meal with loved ones we haven’t seen in a long time - we gather around light and candles and ingest as much love as we can hold without bursting apart at the seams!

It is a feast for remembering we are loved and remembering in the words of our closing song, “God of the Bible, God in the gospel, hope seen in Jesus, hope yet to come. You are our center, daylight or darkness, freedom or prison, you are our home. God in our struggles, God in our hunger, suffering with us, taking our part, still you empower us, mothering Spirit, feeding, sustaining from your own heart. Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise, God always faithful, you do not change.”

Let celebrate this wonder in God and with each other in communion. I will lead us, please respond with bold print.

Jesus Christ, light of the world, we have sung your praises and rejoiced in your love. We give thanks for all the light you have brought into our lives; our families, our congregations, the joy of worship, the pleasure of song, this place in which we have gathered. In your gifts of bread and cup, we receive the gifts of your goodness, love and peace for the new year.

Let us bless the bread together: **Jesus, light of the world, bless this bread given to us by your life, that you may strengthen us to live for you.** (Eat together)

Let us bless the cup together: **Jesus, light of the world, bless this cup that you might shine in us and through us to our homes, schools, and places of work and service.** (Drink together)

Because your light shines and cannot be put out, we trust you, O God, with all our being. Thank you that through your great love in Christ, you feed us and assure us that your goodness to us never ends. Guide us by your Holy Spirit in this new year. Amen.

Hymn: God of the Bible #420

Benediction: Blessed are you who bear the light in unbearable times, who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable, who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems in shadow and grief. Blessed you are in whom the light lives, in whom the brightness blazes - your heart a chapel, an altar where in the deepest night can be seen the fire that shines forth in you in unaccountable faith, in stubborn hope, in love that illumines every broken thing it finds. (Jan Richardson, Circle of Grace, p. 47)