

“Lift up Your Eyes and Look Around”
Epiphany, January 4, 2026
Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Have you ever gone down an internet rabbit hole? I did that recently while I was preparing for today. It was a pretty small rabbit hole, but I came across a video I found really interesting. It was a driving instructor demonstrating the importance of visual scanning while you’re driving. She made it for students preparing to take their driving test. But she did a great job of pointing out how important it is to lift your eyes a little as you drive so you can see farther down the road and look around you so you’re aware of other cars and pedestrians and changing traffic patterns. It all sounds like common sense, as I say it, but a lot of us don’t do it very well.

We have a tendency to fixate on what’s immediately in front of us and see with tunnel vision, shutting out peripheral activities. That can lead to accidents when we’re driving, but in other areas of life that narrowness of vision leads to lost opportunities and crippling anxiety as we try to navigate the world while looking at it through a keyhole. And all it takes is a slight adjustment of our vision. We just need to lift our eyes and look around.

That’s Isaiah’s message to an Israelite population that is in danger of collapsing. Their long exile has ended and they are on the verge of rebuilding their society. But there’s a lot of corruption and neglect. If we look at the two chapters just before this one what we find described is a society in moral collapse. They’re going through the motions of piety. They are saying the right prayers and observing all the feasts and sacrifices, but it’s doing them no good at all. At one point, Isaiah mimics them saying, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” They’re complaining that even though they’re practicing the rituals, nothing’s getting better.

God’s response to them is pretty harsh. “Look,” God answers them, “you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” They are so narrowly fixated on their own problems, on protecting their tiny little piece of the pie, that they’re abusing each other and cutting themselves off from any meaningful relationship with God. Isaiah really takes them on a rollercoaster ride in these chapters. Every time they’re told how bad they are, they’re given a reprieve and are told what they can do to fix it.

But finally, in the passage we just heard, they’re given the real solution. “Lift up your eyes and look around.” You notice they’re not being forced to see things in a new way. God does not coerce us to think differently about the world. God invites us to change our perspective, to raise our vision so we’re no longer fixated on protecting ourselves or enriching ourselves. The movement of scripture, over and over, is away from self-absorption toward awareness of and empathy for others. We see that in the commands of Torah, in writings like the story of Ruth or the story of Jonah, in the pronouncements of the prophets and in the gospels, through the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Today's story, what's come to be known as the "epiphany," although there is no voice from the heavens, tells us Jesus' life is even bigger and more consequential than we realized. This is not a story whose meaning is limited to Christians. This is a story meant for anyone willing to lift their eyes and look around them to see beyond their own needs. As I've said many times, stories in the gospels have multiple layers of meaning. One of them, in this story about the Magi, is to indicate that Jesus' birth reaches beyond the Jewish world and attracts even Gentile sages. So, the world has taken notice of what's happened in Bethlehem. But as we know, what follows this story is a brutal response from the powers that be in Judea.

What we're given, then, is a clash of powers and a contrast in how power is used. The power of Herod, backed by Rome, is coercive and manipulative and leaves destruction in its wake. The power of God is expressed through persuasion, the Magi aren't forced to follow the star, and through humility and weakness. The epiphany of this story, the enlightenment it offers, is the realization that power, true power, is not really in the hands of the mighty. Power lies in our capacity to change our hearts to embrace weakness and vulnerability. It lies in our willingness to use our wealth and resources to venerate the humble rather than fawning on the arrogant.

Herod and all Jerusalem are right to be afraid. Jesus' birth, God's entry into the world through the birth of a child, is a threat to their position and power. But it doesn't have to be. Like their ancestors, they too can lift up their eyes and look around. But they choose to resist God's activity and protect their status.

There are certain constants in history that we can count on. One of them is that people in power will often do whatever is necessary to stay in power. Jesus' birth offers an alternative to that rule. It's possible now to treat our attachment to power differently, even to let it go and allow ourselves to live with compassion and justice for the vulnerable and rejected.

But that only happens if we're willing to lift our eyes and look around. Right now many of us feel like there's nothing good to see when we look around. We're seeing people in power using their might to enforce their will on weaker people and nations. We're seeing people targeted for removal from our country because of their national origin, while people in need are being denied entry regardless of their actions. There's so much desperation and fear in the world that we have the means to relieve, but are letting fear and bigotry prevent it.

But if we lift our eyes a little higher and look around more widely, we can see there is still cause for joy and hope in this world. During the last several weeks we've heard from places like Harvest House, Providence Farm Collective, and Gerard Place—organizations committed to reaching out to populations in our community in need of assistance and support. They and groups like them offer us a way to reach out beyond these walls and make a difference in the lives of people we'll probably never meet but who struggle every day to get by and are living precariously but for the help we and other communities of faith can provide.

So, generosity and compassion still exist and are still welcomed. Keeping our heads down and fixating only on what concerns ourselves is not an option if we want to worship at the feet of the Christ child. God is calling us to arise and to shine and see the dawning of God's

glory all around us and within us. In a world where the powers that be are marshalled against empathy and acceptance and love, we are God's hope for the world. Lift up your eyes and look around; let Christ be born in you and the light of God's new day will rise.

Amen