



**“THE FRANKINCENSE DIARIES”**  
**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 60: 1-6; MATTHEW 2: 1-12**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**January 6, 2019, Epiphany**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 60:1-6

60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

60:2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

60:4 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.

60:5 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.

60:6 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.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

Matthew 2:1-12

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 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."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 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.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of the LORD.  
**Thanks be to God.**

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Take your bulletin out and let's spend a moment with the picture on the front. Allow your mind to travel into that lush green, rugged space. Let your eyes move around the space this image brings to us. What do you see? What do you notice?

If your eyes are not your keenest sense then close them. This journey is about imagination—stretching, playing, dancing, dreaming, not about an image on a page.

Green earth, rounded mountains, a verdant valley. A scrappy tree about 7 feet tall distinguishes itself in the landscape. There are a few similarly shaped trees beyond it—smaller from distance or age.

Dirt roads are on either side of the tree—about 100 yards each way. The terrain is rugged, ancient, discovered, not developed, but capitalized.

I wonder where you are in this picture. A traveler—a gazing tourist? A creature burrowing into the ground? A bird nesting or foraging among a pile of branches?

Today, I am the tree.

I am the frankincense tree. And this is just part of my story—you can never know all of it—words, after all, are not my first language.

There are many ways to know me—my ethereal fragrance, my healing oils, the gritty touch of my sap hardening so that it can be taken.

I revel in the power that exists within me—to heal, to elicit silence and awe, to mark a holy moment, to pay homage, to adore.

Whether you know it or not, the power within me is also within you. And it is something the Creator imagined for moments just like this one—holy moments, moments of truth.

How often do you savor that? How often do you celebrate that about yourself?

Always start with the beautiful part of how you were made—that's what I've learned. Always start with the beautiful part of how you were made to understand your purpose and your power.

If that's hard for you to believe about yourself—you need to come with me to a radiance that I cherish and that I pour out to you.

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While I revel in the sunlight as a tree, night is when I dream.

My dreams are the poetry of stars—ancient, infinite, beyond, and beautiful. The stars are my family—my kin—brilliant sisters, mysterious mothers, luminous brothers, and grandfather shepherds.

My dreams are the stars' stories of the world—they sing and dance our stories right above us.

I don't dream alone—and neither do you.

We all dream and grow together at night.

That's when your imagination feels free to bring you gifts—to bring you truth that we share—challenging, vexing, nurturing truth.

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When they come and harvest me—my life force, my power—some are more gentle than others. Access to me is passed from father to son—generation after generation. Right relationship is possible, though more rare now with my human cousins.

A few times a year they come and cut a hole and ask me to weep for you—for a world that treasures me and exploits me all at once. They give me two weeks to make peace with this gift I am asked to give—and I use it to make sure the water within me will not be lost.

The first tear that emerges like a mother's milk is one that they dare not confiscate. And then they come back and make a bigger, deeper hole---my dried sap is what they take.

As long as they only come two or three times a year I can recover, regenerate, and be fully alive in this relationship. As long as they only cut me in nine places I can survive and even thrive. But there are times when as many as 27 cuts leave me depleted—they want more of me than I can give. And they have started to cut me year round.

That's not just my story—it's ours, the world's. The power we have within us—that beautiful beginning—it longs for right relationship, it thrives in right relationship. But the world often wants more—and mutuality becomes mutilation—and the length of our days is shortened and we languish. We don't get to rest, we don't get to recover.

Our Creator made us to require rest—and to honor each other.

In half of one of your lifetimes, trees like me could all but disappear—a warming earth, over grazing from high demand for red meat, and an increasing demand for frankincense could leave just a trace of us.

And you can't tell us where to grow. Many have tried. But we cannot be farmed, we cannot be domesticated. We can grow in rocks, we can grow in desert. We know how to retain water, we know how to survive. But a living thing can only take so much exploitation.

Somalia, my homeland, suffers, too. The world demands more and more, and it seems those who have tended this land for generations have less and less to show for it.<sup>1</sup>

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My power is not just within me—the life force I share is powerful. I have written the pages of human history. I have changed the course of kings and sultans. I am a divinity-bearing creation. And I am an economic change maker.

I have made cities wealthy. I have controlled trade routes. It is because of me that humans domesticated camels and sailed ships to new markets.

Armies have formed to try and control me. 10,000 Romans tried coming for me some two thousand year ago—but the desert protected me and they turned back.

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You need to know this about me—about what it means to be a frankincense tree in the world that we share. I can help you know yourself better. I can help you see the truth that brought you here to this sacred place today.

You are here to remember a holy moment—Epiphany<sup>2</sup> is the name given this day—when a baby’s birth was a sacred interruption in the lives of powerful men. I carry that story to you—I was there—my blood, my tears, my life force was there.

Kings became fearful and panicked. Wise ones became restless and lured to strange lands. People were on the move—something troubling, shifting, disturbing, promising—it was magnetic—that pull to come and see, to drop everything and go.

It’s not unusual for my oils to anoint a newborn or to bless a marriage or to cherish the dead. I am accustomed to being present for moments brimming with meaning.

But the day you remember today was a different magnitude of holy.

Many have appropriated the stories of that day to make the meaning they desire.

There are some things you should know.

The ones who carried my oils to Bethlehem were not kings—they were mysterious and magical ones—unfamiliar with the prophecies that foretold a Messiah’s birth. They interpreted dreams and were wise to hidden things and ancient secrets.

Somehow the story has come to claim there were just three of them—but the movement was much more wide spread. I cannot number the people who were moved or how the world was changed that day.

The stars—my family—called them to move—to follow the strange movements they saw in the sky.

As the earth moves stars seem to dance across the sky from east to west. But that night, a group of stars came together for a resplendent glow—and that glow moved west and then suddenly south.

Something was changing—and the stars were dancing to invite our wonder.

These wise ones went to King Herod to see what he knew—he was not a popular king—he didn’t fit their profile of what a king should be, for some he had questionable Jewish heritage. So, when he heard about a King of the Jews being

born, he panicked—it was a violent fear. His hostility was repulsive. Jerusalem was troubled not along with Herod but because of him.

The wise ones knew not to assist him.

That glow was their map. Their expectations were fed by their openness, by the ways they had learned to anticipate mysterious and mystical things.

Imagine—moving your body across unfamiliar terrain, pulled by the magnetism of some ethereal sensation.

When they arrived where that glow took them, there was no ceremony, only awe.

Words were not spoken. The world stilled its feverish ways—and in that moment our divine nature was something that brought us deep peace, and animating promise. That beautiful beginning of each one of us was confirmed. The mystery of God's hopes and dreams, wakeful, vivid, and present.

That night, I was the most valuable offering made to this mysterious child in human terms—back then, I was worth much more than the gold.

I was the offering that acknowledged more than the rest of the offerings. I am the one that spoke volumes about the power of this moment--that this was God's incarnate. God comes humble, vulnerable, trusting, inviting us to see the miracle of love made flesh.

And just like the exploitation of my bark because of too much demand, because of greed, because of desperation, the holiness of that day in Bethlehem languishes.

You have forgotten how to dream, you have forgotten that you can journey to a place where the truth will change you forever.

The truth of God born in you, the truth of God born in resistance to enthroned power, the truth of God born into a world come home to itself.

Why has this child been used to divide people, to shame people, to annihilate people, to destroy community, to concentrate wealth? What exploitation has gotten us to our current profanity of purpose as God's creatures?

You and I are not here to exploit or be exploited. We are here because God made us to be in right relationship.

Our luminosity shimmers in our capacity for mutual regard, for shared power, for witnessing each other's sacred purpose.

Grandmother and grandfather stars keep calling us to look up to see this expansive freedom we were made to enjoy.

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I can mend cracked pots and make them water tight again. I can sweeten your breath. Egyptian maids used my soot to paint the eyelids of the Queens they tended.

I can bring swelling down and calm inflammation. I can cross the blood/brain barrier and open your mind to long forgotten things and to divine mystery.

I was used long ago by priests to cover the smell of crowds gathered for mass. I repel mosquitos.

I can reset dividing cells, stop some tumors from growing, break a fever, and calm nausea.

I can honor kings and embalm bodies that have transitioned to death.

I, the frankincense tree, am a sign and a carrier of God's abundant love.

Your prophets have been singing to you for ages now—about signs of abundance and God's love for the world.

The music of your true identity in God is my song and my fragrance—may it be yours this Holy day of remembering.

Thanks be to God.

(At the table) May we see and be radiant; may our hearts thrill and rejoice, because God's abundant love nourishes and heals our life together. Lift up your voices and together let us sing our way to the joyful feast of the people of God!

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<sup>1</sup> Frankincense is an iconic example of the complexity and inequity of the global economy. This story with the BBC is just one snapshot: <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170101-how-frankincense-could-reshape-africa>

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the various traditions of Epiphany: <https://www.readthespirit.com/religious-holidays-festivals/tag/epiphany/>