

Matthew 2:1-12  
January 6, 2019 – THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

## Rise and Shine! Your Light Has Come!

Dear Christians: **Rise and Shine! Your Light Has Come!**

Sometimes the smallest acts of kindness bring great good, especially when God is guiding and directing. Visiting a church for the first time can be scary enough. But imagine you're a Hmong teenager entering an Anglo church. You not only don't know anyone, but all the seats are taken. Ever have that anxious feeling you might not belong? Then an older gentleman gets up and offers you his seat. Your culture says honor your elders. He's honoring you, a foreigner. Why? What makes his kindness shine?

Last month our *WELS Connection* video showed WELS President Schroeder telling a similar story about Bounkeo Lor. His father had been a pastor in a refugee camp in Thailand. Somehow they found their way to a WELS church in Kansas City. In time Bounkeo and his three brothers became WELS Pastors through PSI (Pastoral Studies Institute). He wanted God's Word broadcast and posted sermons on the Internet. You hear the kindness and love of God in Christ – taking away your guilt, giving you His grace – you can't help it. You just have to **Rise and Shine!** and give God the glory. **Your Light Has Come!**

Isaiah saw this 700 years before Christ. After listing painful sins that would make for a not-so-merry Christmas and a downright dreadful New Year, he breaks into our First Reading: *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD is dawning upon you. Look, darkness covers the earth, and deep darkness covers the peoples, but the LORD will dawn upon you, and his glory will be seen over you. Nations will walk to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”* (60:1-3 EHV<sup>1</sup>)

2,000 years ago *kings* saw a star when it rose, a special star created and timed by God to lead them westward to His greatest Gift to see the light of God's glory. Imagine them searching their libraries. A young Jewish teenager centuries earlier had not let captivity in a foreign land rob him of his joy or dim the light of God's glorious grace. Some think Daniel founded the order of Magi, Wise Men. We don't know those details, but God did promise: *“A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.”* (Numbers 24:17 NIV84) As the new star moved westward, they followed – undeterred by distance, undaunted by its disappearance, not embarrassed to ask directions in Jerusalem even of cruel King Herod. And when Bethlehem was named as the place from Micah 5:2, the Magi were overjoyed to see the star appear again. You know how they felt if you've ever suffered deep, dark time depression when you don't know the way. Then light dawns from God's Word. **Rise and Shine! Your Light Has Come!**

Now imagine another young man in a high mountain village of Vietnam. He is an expert in Hmong culture. People seek his wisdom, his advice, his shaman claims to tell their fortune. But he feels guilty about taking so much from the poor because he knows it's all a lie. He performed funerals and provided music, but could not give any hope to mourners. What could pierce his darkness? A Christian pastor was broadcasting the Good News about Jesus the Savior. Hearing of a nearby village becoming Christian, Tsavxwm (“Chauncey”) Ham got Christian materials and left his old life behind. All happy?

Hardly. A year later Tsavxwm was arrested. Government officials tried to shame him into renouncing his faith by telling how Christians believe in the God of all creation. Instead, God's Word motivated him to stand firm and serve his congregation more earnestly. An army general pressured and persecuted him and his wife, but both refused to speak evil of Jesus the Son of God their Savior.

We expect that non believers in government may fear Christians unjustly. How can they know

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV) © 2017 The Wartburg Project. [www.wartburgproject.org](http://www.wartburgproject.org). NPH (800-662-6022).

that Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute and mistreat us, to honor the government as God's representative, even suffering at their hands if God so allows? But what happened to Ham and a Christian friend who travelled with him to Hanoi was sadder still. They asked the Christian Mission Alliance church for help, but only got bad comments about the Hmong people. Persecution by the government, rejection by fellow Christians, could it get any worse?

The night is often darkest just before the dawn. In spite of severe persecution the Vietnamese Fellowship Church (VFC) was welcoming churches into their fellowship. A Hmong Fellowship Church was set up to which Pastor Ham was called to serve as Chairman. Another Hmong pastor had heard Pastor Bounkeo Lor's sermons on the Internet and asked Pastor Lor to come train their pastors. Many of them had only a few days of training to care for souls in mountain villages. Something truly amazing happened as they studied with Bounkeo Lor. They were hearing the Good News in its pristine beauty for the first time. Previously there was no physical or spiritual unity because other churches had taught them to argue about good works they had to do to please God in order to get into heaven. Pastor Lor's clear explanation of Law and Gospel, sin and grace, convinced them from the Bible that Jesus has done everything for our full and free forgiveness with God. Trust in God's Son and His death on the cross in your place, and you are free from guilt and fear. With that freedom came peace in their congregations. It was so obvious that new government officials began to encourage the Hmong to pursue this new teaching of hope. More churches were added as membership swelled from 55,000 to over 100,000 in less than ten years. Now the communist government has asked our synod to build a Hmong pastor training center in Hanoi. Christ's Epiphany light is shining in Vietnam on 2 million Hmong and more in nearby countries.

Remember how the Wise Men responded to God's grace in that Bethlehem house where Joseph had taken Mary and her Child? *"They bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route."*

Living faith in Jesus our living Savior always wants to do something. Sure it is wonderful to sing God's praises, but isn't it even better when total strangers come to praise God with us? Isn't it amazing how you give God's grace away in kindly deeds of service, only to find out that there truly is more joy in giving than receiving? Kids love Christmas for toys that grow old. Older Christians grow in Christmas joy that can never grow old. It keeps growing in the hearts and lives of their little ones and anyone else who sees the light and comes in out of the darkness. **Rise and Shine! Your Light Has Come!**

For several years we've been asking ourselves how we can shine the light of Christ more brightly in our community and beyond to God's world. It's easy to talk in broad terms about a million things we could be doing. But brevity is the mark of the master. And our Master Jesus Christ has called us out of the darkness into His marvelous light. Jesus keeps us on the earth for one reason: Spread the Good News to our neighborhoods and to God's world beyond. Souls are dying to hear God's Word of grace.

Some of our members gifted in strategic planning have distilled hours and hours of discussions into a two-page Vision Statement. We want to recognize God's GRACE GIVEN in more deliberate ways to be GRACE DRIVEN. Can we study as eagerly as Hmong Christians hearing God's Word for the first time? Can we hold unswervingly to God's truth no matter what the persecution or consequences from the unbelieving world around us? Can we recognize the glory of God shining through us in our children, our elderly, our guests who can come to be built up in their faith or maybe even come to faith for the first time? GRACE GIVEN can't help bearing fruit in GRACE DRIVEN Discipleship that wants to learn more and more of God's Word. We can't help growing and enhancing our Facility to glorify God as visually as possible. Now can we also respond to the urgent call of our fellow Christians from far away Vietnam? Can we join with our WELS brothers and sisters to help build a Hmong pastor training center in Hanoi? Our next Fifth Sunday Door offering is the last Sunday of March. Please carefully, prayerfully consider your response with the envelope stapled inside the WELS-Hmong brochure today. **Rise and Shine! Your Light Has Come!** May the sweet love of God in Christ warm your heart and home with

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glorious Epiphany grace this New Year. Amen.