

Reflecting the light (Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12)

Maybe we ask too much of ourselves—and too little of God—if we expect to produce light.

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I used to have, from my bedroom window, an unobstructed view of a 9,000-foot mountain. Every morning, the first thing I did was look at that mountain. Some mornings it blushed peach; on others it was a honey-gold. On bright days after a snowfall its refulgence made my eyes water.

Partly I looked at that mountain to admire its soul-stirring geography. But I also looked at it to watch the play of light moving across its evergreen-clotted slopes, its mile-high fields of scree. In looking at the mountain, I was looking at the sun.

Isaiah 60 opens with a poem about reflection. There is the “light” that has come, and then there’s what the holy city does in response: shine, be radiant. As the mountain reflects the sun, so do God’s people reflect God.

This seems agreeable enough as a theological statement, but its implications give me pause. If the glory of God is as indiscriminate as light—and I believe that it is—then I suspect that, if I were able to perceive with the eyes of perfect faith, the radiance of even this broken world would bring me to my knees. But as my faith is seriously imperfect, all I typically discern are brief, bright flashes in the dark, like a field of spinning mirrors catching a midnight moon. Yet this, too, has so far proved enough to sustain a needy spirit. After all, the light of God is like love: a little bit goes a long way.

The story of the Magi is also a story of reflection. We can’t see the marvelous star they pursued, but we know it was there because we have the story of how a handful of astrologers put themselves in the path of its light. We know the star was there, I mean, because their courage and their curiosity intercepted that light and sent its brilliance bounding down the corridors of our history.

Christians have a habit of admonishing each other to *be the light*. But maybe that’s not the most helpful way to frame our work of faith. Maybe we ask too much of ourselves—and too little of God—if we expect to produce light. We are not here, after all, to burn, which by definition leads to burnout. We are here so that our lives—our words and deeds and hopes and pleas—evinces a light that is utter, infinite, glorious beyond all saying, and yet somehow, also, already right here.