

Epiphany 2026 January 4 Trinity Episcopal Church Santa Barbara

Happy New Year. It's time to start something new.

Once again, "It's time for us to channel our own inner Princess Leia ... and get ready to go out and defeat the evil Empire."

Let me explain. Several years ago, theologian Susan Thistlethwaite wrote a post after the death of Carrie Fisher, beloved Princess Leia of *Star Wars* fame. She urged her readers to focus not on her death, but on her brave life, and to face into the challenges of the new year. She said we should all "channel our own inner Princess Leia ... find some allies...and get ready to go out and defeat the evil Empire."

Matthew is saying pretty much the same thing—I'll get back to Princess Leia in moment—but first, Matthew and his telling of the Christmas story and King Herod and Joseph.

In his imagining the birth of Jesus, Matthew calls upon images from the prophet Isaiah. Matthew's community was steeped in the teaching of Isaiah, as was Jesus, and those images and quotes from Isaiah show up again and again throughout Matthew's version of the Jesus story.

Matthew wants his Jewish listeners to recognize Jesus' own Jewish roots in their tradition. So he takes a page from Isaiah, who centuries earlier had announced the signs of God's presence in the world with language about peace and light and justice and healing and liberation and joy.

In his story about the birth of Jesus, Matthew brings light—he hangs a star in the sky. That star in the sky, if you can see it, leads to the light in the darkness, the sign of God present among us.

With this star, Matthew clues us, we can find the one who reflects the presence of God, right from his birth. In Jesus we see the Light of God.

Matthew knows that his community can recognize the light, because they can also recognize the darkness. In the story of Herod, they can see one more Pharaoh, one more Caesar, one more frightened king worried about any threat to his rule, one more petty tyrant worried that somebody's bigger than he is. Matthew's people in the Galilee are like their ancestors living in exile centuries before, described by Isaiah as "the people who have been living in darkness." And now in the first century, their days are darkened by the shadow of the Roman Empire, by the poverty imprinted upon them by the Roman boot.

But with this word of the star that shines in the night sky, so that even wise men from afar can see what Herod cannot see, they also hear in their hearts the words of Isaiah: “the people who have been living in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the shadow of death light has dawned.”

And they remember that the darkness cannot hold them. The light dawns, always. The story of the star, the story of the strangers coming to pay homage with their gifts of gold and frankincense, the story of those strangers being overwhelmed with joy—they hear this as the sign of God doing something new in their world. And that allows them to sing the old song from Isaiah:

“Arise, shine for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

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.

Kings will come...

camels and gold and frankincense...

Lift up your eyes and look around.

Then you shall see and be radiant,

Your heart shall thrill and rejoice.”

The light of God is not limited to one star in the sky, nor to one baby in a manger whose life is a sign of God in our midst. That light, the prophet says, shines always, in all times, in all the darkness the world serves up, in the *people* of God: Lift up your eyes, look around. *You* will be radiant. *You* will rejoice.

In the Jewish Study Bible, these lines translate from the Hebrew:

“As you behold, you will glow;

Your heart will throb and thrill.”

What Matthew, with Isaiah at his back, is saying to his first century Palestinian community, and to us, is this: God’s light, God’s glory can only shine in this world if it is reflected back. That light causes those foreign men to look up

at the sky and to set off on a journey all the way to the stable. On their knees in the straw, they discover a joy they never thought possible. They know their lives will never be the same again. They have no need for Herod and his treachery, no need to heed the powers of darkness, no need to report back. They go home by another way, their hearts set on fire.

That light causes Joseph to pay attention to his dream, to flee with his family to Egypt, to keep paying attention to the politics of the palace in order to keep his family safe, to keep the Light alive.

I figure that Matthew claimed this light for his first century listeners and for us too. This Light is meant to set *us* afire and show us another way home, a new path, a different way to live, a new home, a way not defined by the powers of darkness, by the Herods of our day.

The stories of our ancestors ask us to lift up our heads and look around. So where do we see that Light shining in the darkness right now? I am pretty sure we could make a good long list of darkness, thick darkness right now. We know the headlines, from Caracas to Santa Maria to Mar-a-Lago to Congress to a flood of social media posts—I won't go on. No light there. And we know beloved family and neighbors and friends and colleagues who struggle with new health care worries and finances and all manner of loss and grief and brokenness and uncertainty. There is plenty of daunting darkness in this new year.

But we are the ones, in the midst of darkness, in the middle of our brokenness, we are the ones who are to lift up our heads and look around. We are the ones, the ancient stories tell us, who are to behold, and *glow*. The light of Christ, the light of God, is reflected in us, and refracted through us.

So, where have you seen that light? Who has shown you something of what the prophet Isaiah pointed to when he named joy, light, peace, justice, healing, liberation? Where do you glimpse a thread of one of those signs of God?

I want to try, in 2026, to find each day just three signs of the light of God, the light of Christ, in my day. I want to make it a practice to notice. It might be the dancing joy in my grandson Diego's bright eyes or my grandson Pablo's lilting voice—that's easy. It might be the gift of rain. It might be some good news about brave judges who stand up for our Constitution. It might be the hope of a few elected leaders who work together across the aisle to improve the lives of *regular* folks. There are many ways that God shows up in our day with peace, justice, healing, liberation, light and joy.

So each day, I want to be on the alert for three signs of the presence of God in our world. I invite you to join me. Maybe we'll start to glow, or at least lighten up a little. And that won't be because of any effort of mine or yours. The light of God shines upon us, and through us, without any help from us. All we have to do is look up, just like those wise men in the story. All we have to do is pay attention,

just like Joseph.

And so that's where Princess Leia comes in.

My friend Susan called Carrie Fisher a hero. Susan wrote in her blog:

"While Fisher is beloved for her Star Wars roles as the kick butt Princess Leia who becomes a seasoned General in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, in real life she was a strong advocate for mental health. She bravely [shared her own struggles](#) in many interviews, and encouraged honest talk about mental health.

"This is what heroism actually looks like.

"This lived heroism translated powerfully to film. A young woman of barely twenty years of age grabs a blaster and fights the Empire. Successfully. And the Empire comes back swinging, kind of like mental illness can come back. So she fought it again. And again. Heroism is staying in the struggle.

"You just don't let the Empire win...[Susan writes,] "What you do is you channel your inner Princess/General Leia and you get some allies who are also flawed and struggling, and you form an Alliance and go out and defeat them, again."

As Isaiah would put it, that's when you begin to see, and be radiant, and rejoice.

As Matthew would put it, that's when you discover joy you never thought possible and learn that you can go home by another way.

That's when the light shines through the darkness. Again.

May the Force be with you.

Anne Howard

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