

Flip the Switch

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 11, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#) and [Matthew 5:13-16](#)

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Arise! Shine! For your light has come. You are the light of the world; don't hide your light under a bushel basket!

Well, Isaiah, if it were as simple as flipping a switch, I would flip the switch every day. And Matthew, you have got to realize that some days I'm not sure I've even got enough light for the hallway, let alone the whole world. In fact, I've been feeling that way for most of this past week. The world, or at least my corner of it, has seemed very dark to me.

January 6 was the 5th anniversary of the insurrection in Washington, D.C. I found myself angry all over again about President Trump's clemency of almost 1600 people convicted of various federal crimes associated with the violence perpetrated that day.¹ The first anniversary of that clemency – January 20, inauguration day – is just nine days away.

Then, the next day, January 7, we learned about the homicide of Renee Good in Minneapolis, shot 3 times by an ICE agent. And then, as so many of us were grieving, we had to endure lies from Trump, Vance, and Noem about Good, and lies claiming that she had endangered the ICE agent who shot her. I saw a video of the shooting and, no, Good did not endanger the ICE agent. President Trump, if you want to know who endangers law enforcement officers, look to the people to whom you granted clemency a year ago. 140 police officers assaulted, documented by the Department of Justice.²

Some days, it's hard to rise and shine.

The reading from Isaiah is actually the reading from the Hebrew scriptures assigned for Epiphany in Year A of the Lectionary. Epiphany. January 6. I feel like that day has been stolen from me by the insurrectionists.

Yes, we talked about the magi arriving a little early this year. I didn't want to leave them out of the Advent and Christmas worship series, so we read the story from Matthew about these wise skywatchers two weeks ago. But when I was planning this new worship series on Spiritual Self Care, the Isaiah passage spoke to me. Recognizing that the light has come, that *our* light has come, seems like a good spiritual practice, an act of spiritual self care.

So, here's this cheery reading, coming on a dark day, during a dark week. And I find myself wondering about how many magi started following the star and then left the journey. Matthew never says how many came, only that there were three gifts. And since I think the magi offering gifts to Jesus and his family are more likely to be a literary device than an historic fact, I feel free to imagine. So I wonder how many magi left the journey, discouraged by its length, the heat of the desert, the dull, dreary conditions of the trek.

It sure is taking a long time for the moral arc of the universe to bend to justice. The heat of the government-sponsored violence is making me hot under the collar. And this journey to wholeness sure is long.

I wonder about how many magi settled for something less, setting their hearts on other things, settling for a life lived on a lesser plane. In other words, I'm thinking about the beginning of the journey, the initial invitation to follow the star. And that makes me wonder about the stars we are following. Are we following stars that proclaim holiness made flesh? Or are we following stars that proclaim things of a lesser plane?

I've heard it said that there are two kinds of people: People who wake up, roll over, and say, "Good morning, Lord!" And there are people who wake up, roll over, and say, "Good Lord. Morning."

Actually, I think there are two kinds of *mornings*. There are mornings when I can wake up and flip the switch, mornings when I rise and shine, for I know my light has come. I can see the star. I know who I'm following and the steps are easy. I am not alone. And there are mornings when I need help.

Here are three stories about those mornings when we need help.

Story one:³ One night, a century and a half ago, a man took a little candle out of a drawer and lit it. Then he began to climb a long winding stairway. "Where are you going?" asked the candle.

"I am going to show the ships out at sea where the harbor is," said the man.

"No ship could ever see my light," said the little candle. "It is very, very small."

"Your light is enough. Keep it burning and leave the rest to me," the man said. When the man got to the top of the lighthouse, for this was a lighthouse they were in, he took the little candle and with it lit the great lamp that stood ready with its polished reflector behind and its lens in front.

Some days it may feel like you only have enough light for a hallway. Who carries you up the stairs so that little bit of can ignite others to shine?

My second story comes from Robert Fulghum.⁴ It is about a man named Alexander Papaderos, who grew up in a tiny Greek village on the island of Crete. When Papaderos was a young boy, his island was invaded by the Nazis, and hundreds of his fellow villagers were executed for daring to resist. After the war, the people of Crete held a special hatred in their hearts against the Germans. Nonetheless, Alexander had a vision of building on the site of that massacre an institute where the people of Crete and the people of Germany could come together in peace. He figured that if they could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any people could. Papaderos succeeded. The institute became a reality and Papaderos himself became a living legend.

One summer, Robert Fulghum traveled there to attend a two-week seminar on Greek culture. Fulghum wrote:

"At the last session on the last morning,... Papaderos rose from his chair at the back of the room and walked to the front, where he stood in the bright Greek sunlight of an open

window and looked out. We followed his gaze across the bay to the iron cross marking the German cemetery. He turned. And made the ritual gesture: 'Are there any questions?' Quiet quilted the room. These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now there was only silence.

"No questions?" Papaderos swept the room with his eyes. So I asked: 'Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?' The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was.

"I will answer your question.' Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And what he said went like this: 'When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

"I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine – in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge – is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the [dark] places in the hearts of men – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.' And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk."

Even when you don't have a light, maybe you only need to be a fragment of a mirror whose whole design you do not know.

A third story:⁵ There was a farm that had a well, a dug well, that was the source of water for the family and the animals that lived there. One day, a small animal fell into the well and drowned. Of course, the carcass needed to be removed as quickly as possible, and the only person who was small enough to safely climb down the well and big enough to carry the animal carcass out was the youngest daughter. The farther down she went on the hanging ladder, the darker and moister and more eerie it got, and the lonelier she felt.

Then a strange thing happened. When she got deep enough for the well to be very dark, she looked below into the dark. And, to her surprise, she wasn't looking into darkness. The water had started glistening. She realized that she could see the sky reflected back in it. Only it wasn't the sky of the hot summer's day. It was the night sky, the light of

stars she could not see when she stood at the well, preparing herself for her descent. Only there at the bottom of the well did she receive the gift of the stars' light reflected.

Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

- On days when you can, what helps you flip the switch? What do you do to help you simply rise and shine?
- On days when you can't just flip the switch, who carries you up the stairs so your little light can be shared so others can shine?
- On days when you don't even have a little light, how can you make of game of reflecting the light that is around you into the dark corners?
- What is revealed when you descend into darkness?

1 "Pardon of January 6 United States Capitol attack defendants," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardon_of_January_6_United_States_Capitol_attack_defendants (accessed 10 January 2026).

2 *Ibid.*

3 Unattributed, "Shine," *Aha!*, 6 January 2002.

4 In his book, *It Was on Fire when I Lay Down on It*.

5 David Lander, "Seeing the stars through life's murky waters," *Aha!*, 6 January 2002, reprinted from *Currents*.