



Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

Epiphany of Jesus Christ, Year C

LIGHT, BRIGHTER AND BRIGHTER

At Epiphany, God's light shines over all, over the entire world. The readings for Epiphany invite the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community of faith to let its light, God's diverse and wondrous light, shine with justice and joy.

Today's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#); [Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14](#); [Ephesians 3:1-12](#); [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"This holy day, the Epiphany of Jesus Christ, is both an invitation and a challenge. The day invites the church to 'see' past the stereotypes of LGBT people and challenges LGBT people to 'arise and shine.'" Mona West



"In order for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all marginalized people to be truly free, we must have courage to proclaim our gifts as lights we bring. Only when we shine and accept the shining gifts of others will we truly live into the light of Epiphany."

David Wynn



"Epiphany is the celebration of light in the church. It's an invitation for LGBT people to let our lights shine as a distinct gift we bring to the body of Christ. I think of church hymn 'This Little Light of Mine.' Sung within the context of my own faith tradition, letting one's light shine is best realized in our collective work toward God's justice and moral leadership."

Irene Monroe

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about today's lectionary Bible passages

In western Christian tradition, Jan. 6 is celebrated as the Epiphany of Jesus Christ. In many Hispanic communities, it is known as *el Día de los Tres Reyes* (the Day of the Three Kings), *la Fiesta de Reyes* (the Festival of the Kings) or *el Día de los Reyes Magos* (the Day of the Magi). In these communities, the festival focuses on today's gospel story from Matthew about the visit of the Magi, often called the Wise Men, to honor Jesus. Epiphany celebrates God's light, manifestation or revelation, to the whole world — especially known through Christ's healing divisions of nationalism, prejudice and bigotry.

Isaiah 60:1-6 is from the prophet often identified as Second Isaiah, during the time when the Hebrew people were scattered in exile. They longed to return to Mount Zion, their holy mountain at Jerusalem. This is a passage of hope and restoration, and is almost certainly the source for the visit of the Magi in today's reading from Matthew 2:1-12. Modern depictions of the event and the carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are," also take basic elements from this passage from Isaiah.

The passage is one of light and sight. The glory of God (the Hebrew *kabodh*), found in verse 1, appears extensively in Isaiah and elsewhere in Hebrew Scripture. It is a central word for divine self-revelation or epiphany. Within Christian tradition, the festival of Epiphany and the liturgical season that follows express this fundamental theme. It refers to the light of God revealed to the whole world, as described in Isaiah, but, in our particular tradition, it also suggests God revealed in Jesus Christ, our Light.

The image of light breaking forth from the shadows appears also in Isaiah 9:2 and 42:16. In Isaiah's prophetic vision, Zion rises again and will be a light to the nations. Those in exile will return. Even those from Arabia will be drawn to this new light — they will bring great riches and praise God. Indeed the restored people will shine with God's renewed favor.

Some scholars and several books have described LGBT people as a people in exile. A community of God's people scattered. Yet even in exile, we are called to shine and to offer our gifts for God's realm of justice and love. At the same time, we work for and seek places of acceptance and just relationships that shine with God's glory.



Why are LGBT people sometimes described as people in exile? Where are the places of light in our current world that are embracing of LGBT people? What hope do such places offer?

In **Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14** we discover Hebrew understandings of a faithful ruler — a prayer for God's blessings upon such a ruler. Probably written to celebrate a king's coronation or birthday, the psalm emphasizes the prophetic image of a just and effective monarch who receives honor and tribute from many nations. The psalmist incorporates the theme of social justice from the great prophets of Israel. The psalmist prays that the ruler receives the gifts of justice (verse 1), righteousness (verse 2), fairness to and defense for those who are poor (verses 2, 3, 4), deliverance of those needy (verse 4) and strength over those who oppress the needy (verse 4).

In Hebrew tradition, the passage points to the character of holy leadership especially in the tradition of King David. Many Christians understand this holy leadership as embodied in Jesus. Both traditions celebrate God's concern through anointing leadership that is faithful, just and compassionate.



As LGBT people, where do we get our understandings of faithful leadership? What is our prayer for leaders both in our nation and in our communities of faith? How do we embrace and live out the holy and prophetic commitments present in Psalm 72?

Ephesians 3:1-12 is a curious letter to many scholars. In particular, many question the authorship of this letter. Some point to Paul, late in his career. Others suggest that it was written later by one who would have known Paul's thoughts and writings well.

The letter is significant especially at the festival of Epiphany, the season of Light. Like the earlier passage from Isaiah, this passage expresses how God opens and brings light to all people. The author suggests that Paul was imprisoned particularly "for the sake of the Gentiles" (verse 1), those who were other than Jews. The author speaks of the "mystery of Christ" once unknown to the Gentiles, but now they "have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Ephesians 3:5, 6).

The emphasis for this passage is on the radical act of inclusion intended in Christ, reflecting a light similar to that found in Isaiah. God's light draws all in. For the church, for the LGBT people of faith, we will not settle for a faith that does not shine — on us, on those who suffer, on all God's children.



How do you see Christianity and other faiths shining with God's justice and compassion? Do you see the Christian faith as a faith that is more "open" or "closed"? Where might God be calling you to be open, to shine?

The author of **Matthew 2:1-12** drew upon Hebrew Scripture to tell the story of Jesus. In the passage for today, we see evidence of the imagery from Isaiah and other Hebrew Scriptures as Micah 5:2. The author positions this story of the visit by the Magi to Jesus to both present Jesus in the Jewish line of King David and also Jesus as one who opens salvation to all nations and people.

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (verse 2). The question is asked by non-Jewish astrologers, Magi, from ancient Persia of King Herod in Jerusalem. They tell Herod they have seen the star, the light, and want to pay homage to the newborn king. Herod became concerned, perhaps worried that the future reign of his own children was threatened. He sends the Magi on to Bethlehem to search for the child, hoping they would return with news. Only later we discover Herod's interest would be to destroy the child (verses 16 -18). The Magi, however, return "by another road" (verse 12).

Overwhelmed with joy, the Magi find Mary and Jesus where "the star had stopped" (verse 10). They kneel and offer the finest of gifts. Strangers from far away are drawn to the light of Christ. Jesus was not just for Bethlehem, not just for Jerusalem, but for the world. The child of peace, Jesus, was born in the midst of political and religious hostility and violence.

The hostility and violence continues in our world. Many LGBT people know firsthand the threats, injustice and cruelty. Yet, in spite of the danger, many LGBT people have taken the journey to the light of faith. They shine with their gifts.



What fears and comfort does the story of the Magi elicit for LGBT people and congregations that support them? Why would outsiders be drawn to the light of Christ? In what ways have you been challenged or comforted by the Scripture lessons for Epiphany?



God, all Light, all Truth,
we seek you.

Show us the way in this world and at this time.
Shine on us. O, shine on your entire world.

Shine with your peace, justice and compassion.
In the name of Jesus, Light and Truth. Amen.

"Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of God is upon you" (Isaiah 60:1).

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Baptism of Jesus, First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

GATHERING A PEOPLE

God calls God's people into being, gathering us into community with tenderness and strength.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#); [Psalm 29](#); [Acts 8:14-17](#); [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"The strength of a community can be measured by its willingness to cast off those things which inhibit growth, transformation and healing. Jesus models for us a 'winnowing' rooted in love." Anne Dunlap



"In these Bible passages, God speaks to us through various ways from the power of creation to the simple and intimate laying of hands upon us through the disciples." Derek Krehbiel



"The task of the Christian is to keep God at the center, seeking to find God and remember God in daily life. When we do this spiritual work together, our communities become healing vessels providing protection, strength and transformation to all of God's beloved children." Sara Rosenau

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Isaiah 43:1-7 is both deeply intimate and powerfully protective. God calls out to Israel, claiming them and reassuring them, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1). This powerful claim on Israel comes at a time when Israel had been beaten down, scattered and fragmented. After naming Israel's worth, God assures God's people of their protection. The well-known refrain reads, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isaiah 43:2).

These powerful words of strength and protection have struck a chord with communities throughout history. One thinks of the hymn "How Firm a Foundation" or the civil rights song "We Shall Overcome." Although this passage can be read for the individual, it is important to remember that God calls and protects nations, tribes and communities as well. For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, who often feel isolated in their persecution, there is great comfort in God's promised protection for the whole community. When communities stand together, the waters "shall not overwhelm" and the flame "shall not consume."

Furthermore, the community was "formed and made" by God and God takes part in gathering the community together. Isaiah 43:7 assures that all are created for God's glory and God will gather all God has called by name. Everyone is being gathered by God, LGBT people and others. God will go to the ends of the earth to gather God's people together. This is the work of a God who deeply loves each creature, and who powerfully brings God's people together.



Can you remember a time when God called you or led you into community? How has your own community become a refuge for you?

Psalms 29 is written in awe of God's power as seen through the natural world. The first few verses instruct all of creation to ascribe glory to God. This is followed by vivid and somewhat terrifying images of a thunderstorm and the voice of God causing Lebanon to skip, flashing flames of fire and a shaking of the wilderness. One footnote even says that God's voice causes "the deer to calve" (Psalm 29:9). This psalm makes clear that all strength and glory come from God. This clarity, however, is not easily reached. For anyone in the midst of a thunderstorm, literally or figuratively, it is a real sign of faith to look into the face a storm and continue to "ascribe" glory to God. Recalling the earlier Isaiah passage, we may understand the dynamic nature of this psalm expressed in people who respond to God's power and choose to say that God is in charge — even when the water is rising, even when things seem really terrible. For the LGBT community and other oppressed groups, it is a powerful thing to name where God is found. In this way, we as God's people gather strength from God by interpreting the events of our lives with God at the center.



When there are thunderstorms in your life, what is your prayer to God? How do you experience

strength in difficult times? Even though we are sometimes angry with God for our suffering, is there a way to give God glory as well?

In the Hebrew Scriptures we find God active in the events of nature, protecting people from flood and fire and present to people in the thunderstorm. In the passages from Acts and Luke, God is active in a community of believers. God calls on the disciples, John the Baptist and Jesus to participate in creating God's community on earth.

Christians who embrace apostolic succession —the Holy Spirit's authority passed from one person to another—might view the Spirit as flowing only through apostolic channels. In **Acts 8:14-17**, Peter and John's visit to Samaria to bring the Holy Spirit to Samaritans makes clear sense. For Christians who believe that the Holy Spirit moves independently of any specific group of people, however, this passage has other messages.

Compared to the majestic power of God speaking to Israel in the first person (Isaiah 43:1-7) and God as a force of nature imbuing all of Israel with strength (Psalm 29), Acts 8:14-17 presents a simpler yet equally powerful vision of how God works in our world. This passage describes humanity's role in bringing about God's reign by calling each other into a new state of being. The community of believers, represented by Peter and John, hears, journeys and touches the newly baptized Samaritans as human manifestations of the Holy Spirit, completing the baptismal act. In a simple yet intimate moment, Peter and John lay their human hands on the Samaritans, acknowledging and affirming their acceptance into the communal body of Christ.



How do you recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in individuals and communities who have traditionally been excluded from such power? When have you been touched in a way that you might view as Spirit-filled?

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 presents two movements in the baptism of Jesus — first with water and then with the declaration from the heavens that Jesus is beloved of God. But who is this Jesus? Early in the text, the John describes the one to come as a winnower, working to clear his threshing floor (Luke 3:17). With his winnowing fork, he separates the useful part of the wheat, the seed — that which is edible, edifying, nourishing — from the useless part, the chaff — that which has little benefit to the human. The chaff is tossed into the "unquenchable" fire.

What is being described here is not a "sorting out" of "good" people from "bad," with the bad tossed into hellfire, an interpretation with which LGBT folk may be too familiar. Rather, the winnowing process echoes a process of discernment and spiritual growth. God separates out of one's self and the community those actions, beliefs, prejudices, biases, attitudes, which do little to edify and nourish the individual and community. That which is, in fact, harmful, is separated from that which nurtures. To be saved in this process are those things which build up, which heal, which create community and individual wholeness. That the fire is unquenchable implies that this winnowing is a perpetual, ongoing practice for all. Jesus as the winnower, beloved of God, shows us a Jesus, then, whose concern is to bring about the wholeness of the beloved community of God.



How might Jesus, the lover of justice, be calling you to speak out against those things in your community which harm others? What might Jesus be "winnowing" in your life? How are you being called to wholeness?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of all life,
we give you thanks that you are ever with us.
In the turbulent deep waters,
in the ecstasy of love,
in the winnowing of our lives,
your grace is all-sufficient.
Alone and together, in community
your powerful love surrounds us
as we journey the path you set before us.
Remind us, Gracious One,
that we, all of us, are gathered in you.
In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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2nd Sunday of Epiphany, Year C

SHINING FOR JUSTICE

During this week we are invited to move deeper into the season following Epiphany with a call for salvation that burns like a torch and with gifts of the Holy Spirit that light the way for the common good.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 62:1-5](#) [Psalm 36:5-10](#); [1 Corinthians 12:1-11](#); [John 2:1-11](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"Throughout history, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans- gender people have been uniquely spiritual people. In the season following Epiphany, we do not hide our light under a bushel, but bring our gifts to the body of Christ." Mona West



"As those who often live in the 'borderlands,' LGBT people of faith and other questioning people are invited to discover our power, embrace it, and be known in it. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus, although reluctant at first, teaches us to reveal our power in the midst of the crowd and to be known." David Wynn



"Our lives as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith can be a shining light. Our light is not only the gifts we bring to the body of Christ, but our light is also the challenge we bring to this nation, this society, through our distinctive prophetic call for justice." Irene Monroe

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Isaiah 62:1-5 is part of a collection of prophetic speeches often known as 'Third Isaiah' (chapters 56-66). These speeches are directed to the Israelites who are in exile in Babylon. The tone of the words is of comfort and hope. In chapter 62, the prophet assures the people that God will not keep silent, nor will God rest until "vindication shines out like the dawn" and "salvation burns out like a torch" (verse 1). God's deliverance of the people from oppression will shine in such a way that all will see it. In addition, the exiles will be given a new name, a fresh, new beginning.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people may identify with the exiles in this passage from Isaiah and with the prophet who speaks on behalf of God. In a time when the church is struggling with full inclusion of LGBT people, we can take comfort and hope in knowing God will not rest until there is a day when no-one will be in exile. LGBT people also join their voices with the prophet, covenanting not to keep silent, but instead to name and share their gifts with the larger church.



How can the church, during this season following Epiphany, see past the stereotypes of LGBT people and invite them to let their light shine?

Psalm 36:5-10 are verses which contrast the "transgressions of the wicked" in verses 1-4 with the steadfast love of God. This love is all encompassing and extends from the heavens all the way to the "great deep" (verse 6). Even the animal world is included in God's scope of love and salvation. Indeed God is the fountain of life. The "light" theme of Epiphany is expressed in verse 9. In God's light we truly see light.



In what ways do LGBT people experience the light of God?

The church of **1 Corinthians 12:1-11** is a diverse and gifted church. As is often the case, diversity is the church's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The Corinthians were having some difficulty understanding the diversity of spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 is Paul's response to a letter the Corinthians had written regarding the matter. Paul emphasizes that there are a variety or diversity of gifts. He identifies a range of gifts that includes wisdom, healing, teaching, and discernment (verses 12:8-10). Paul also stresses that all these gifts come from the one Spirit — not for confusion or envy, but for the common good of the church.

Historians have noted that throughout history LGBT people have been identified in many cultures as shamans, priests, priestesses, keepers of beauty, mediators of the holy, transformers

of society, and sacred clowns. This particular spiritual legacy of LGBT people is important to consider as the church continues to name and embrace the diversity and variety of gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the good of all its members.



What range of gifts have you experienced from LGBT people of faith? How do these gifts reflect the list that Paul mentions? What are the gifts that go beyond those identified by Paul?

In **John 2:1-11**, the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana is the first of seven signs Jesus performs in John's gospel. It is a traditional reading for this season — the first of many signs, epiphanies or manifestations. The signs function in the gospel to point to Jesus as the one sent from God (John 1:14) and to evoke faith in Jesus from the people who witness them. What seems to be the miracle in the story, based on the steward's reaction, is not only Jesus turning of the water into wine. The good news is expressed in the steward's perception that the wine, the Jesus-made-wine, was the very best and saved for the last (John 2:10). Taste and see how good God truly is!



How might a wedding feast be a setting for the revealing of God for LGBT folk? What are epiphanies, signs, of God that have absolutely delighted and surprised you, your community of faith or the broader communities of LGBT people of faith?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Giver of every good and perfect gift, our God,
help us to celebrate and call on the many gifts
that all your children bring.
Give us prophetic hearts and voices
like the psalmist, Isaiah, Paul and Jesus,
like our shining sisters and brothers,
to name oppression and call forth newness.
Shine. Shine in us.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

3rd Sunday of Epiphany, Year

C

THE BODY KNOWS

This week's readings explore the idea of the body as God's inclusive, interconnected, interpretive and revealing community of faith.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a;](#)

[Luke 4:14-21](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"What difference do our bodies, all bodies, make to the 'body of Christ'?"

Mona West



"Our sexualities force us to see walls of division in society, in churches and in our families that keep us from living freely in our bodies. The walls not only contribute to a false shaping of who we are as male and female, but also to a false vision of who we are as the 'body of Christ.'" Irene Monroe



"This Sunday's lectionary passages reveal to us the layered and multi-dimensional aspects of the faith journey. For example, we experience the body as a way that God is made known." David Wynn

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Nehemiah 8:1-10**, the ancient Hebrew people gathered to hear "the law of Moses" read for the first time. ("Law" which is also called "Torah" or "Pentateuch" includes the first five books of the Bible.) The scene is remarkable. Rather than a ritually restricted area of a temple, they gathered at a public place, the Water Gate. This was a place open to "all who could hear with understanding" (verse 2). The people came to hear the priest Ezra read, and read he did, from morning until midday. Throughout the time, people "were attentive to the book of the law" (verse 3). The event became a holy time. Ezra blessed God, and the people raised their hands and shouted the affirmations, "Amen, Amen."

Not only was the event a time of celebration, it was a time of interpretation. Levite priests were on hand to help the people understand "with interpretation" (verse 8). In response, the people wept. Yet Ezra and the priests declared to the assembly, "This day is holy; do not be grieved" (verse 11). This was a joyous reconstitution of the Hebrew people. They departed from the event both celebrating and providing for those who had nothing. Torah came to life, the "text" came to life — in the reading, interpreting and responding of God's whole people.

This interpretive event of the Hebrew people offers an alternative view to how Scripture is often regarded in communities of faith. Interpreting Scripture as the Word of God is always subjective and suspect in intent — whether it is done in the ivy towers of seminaries or within the holy walls of sanctuaries. Interpreting Scripture becomes often a menacing list of "do"s and "don't"s heaped by a few in power upon certain groups of people. In those circumstances the authority of Scripture lays not so much in the words of Scripture, but rests in the power of those who determine what God ought to say. Today's reading from Nehemiah radically places the reading and interpreting of Scripture in the midst of people, all the people. In response, they weep, they rejoice, they open themselves to God and they serve in gratitude.

The Scripture asks us to see the faces and hear the voices of the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, the damned and disrespected. Scripture must be interpreted, celebrated and lived out with those who are poor, illegal immigrants, the homeless and those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

Many scholars believe that **Psalms 19** originally existed as two separate psalms. Verses 1-6 express both creation's thanks to God and God's glory in creation. Verses 7-14 follow the praise of God for creation with thanksgiving for God's gift in and benefits through the law. This celebration of the law echoes the joy expressed by the assembly in Nehemiah. In the psalm, as in Nehemiah, we see how God's Word is a gift to all the people, not just those with privilege. Here the law makes wise the simple, encourages hearts to rejoice and enlightens the eyes. Alongside the Nehemiah passage, held in the heart of all the people, we understand why the law is more

desired than gold and sweeter than honey (verse 10).



What strength do you gather when you experience Scripture interpreted and celebrated in a faithful community that includes people who are often rejected or ignored — as are many people in the LGBT community? What difference does such an assembly, such a body, make to how Scripture is understood?

In **1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**, the author, Paul, describes the church through the analogy of the human body. His image of the beloved community as the body of the risen Christ emphasizes its organic unity. Although the body is one, it is made up of many parts connected and related to one another: "Many members, yet one body" (verse 20). The passage even stresses that, "The members of the body that we think weaker are indispensable" (verse 23). In Christ's body, "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (verse 26). Paul declares the new reality of the church, sensual and embodied: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (verse 27). As members, each employs distinctive gifts for strengthening the body (verse 31).

The passage calls each of us into the body of Christ. Christ's body embraces our bodies as we offer ourselves in Christ's service. Christ's body, with its diverse members and gifts, calls on us to tend to the entire body. If we ignore or disregard God's LGBT people then we neglect the full "body of Christ." If we disregard others who suffer, others who are dishonored, then together in Christ we too suffer and are dishonored. Together, we can rejoice as well! Among the many gifts that LGBT people bring to Christ are our own bodies, our sexuality and our genders. Sexuality is a language and a means to communicate our spiritual need for and delight in intimate communion — human and divine. It is our self-understanding through which we experience the world.



What about the image of the "body of Christ" do you find meaningful or disturbing? What do our bodies — the bodies of LGBT people — teach us about the body of Christ?

In **Luke 4:14-21**, we see Jesus reading, interpreting and embodying the words of the law and prophets. The account links well with both the reading from Nehemiah and Psalm 19. All three affirm the power of God's Word read and embodied in the assembly. The passage from Luke is a lengthier account of Jesus' return to his hometown synagogue that may be found in Matthew 13:53-54 and Mark 6:1-2. Unlike the other gospels, Luke puts the story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This is a defining moment for Luke — this moment introduces us to how Jesus will embody God in the world — what kind of messiah he intends to be. Standing there, in flesh and blood, Jesus claims the words fulfilled in the hearing (verse 21).

In this reading Jesus stands before the assembly and reads from the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2). The reading is one of Isaiah's servant songs that describes the work of the messiah. It is a ministry that delivers hope to those who are poor, captive and oppressed (Luke 4:18). This anointed one, the messiah, also proclaims a year of jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-12), a time when the land rests fallow and is restored to those who lost it through poverty or debt (Luke 4:19). At the conclusion of reading the passage, in verse 21, Jesus claims the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Words to be spoken by the messiah are words now embodied in Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (verse 18).

The readings today connect words, body, calling, community, Spirit and Christ. The LGBT community of faith is challenged to engage Scripture on its own and to embody it in the world. We must refuse to let God's good word [RAR1] go silent. We must accept ourselves as vital members of the living body of Christ. We join our bodies with that of Christ, pray the Spirit of God rests upon us and live compassionately and justly.



What kind of messiah do you believe Jesus embodied? What good news do you see the church, the body of Christ, offering today? Where does the good news of Christ's justice, peace and compassion seem silent? In what ways is God calling on your faith community to embody the good news?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Amazing God, Living Christ, Holy Spirit,
Fill us, enliven our bodies,
our sexuality, our gender expressions.
Form us as ever more faithful
members of your body.
Send us to be your word in the world.
Amen. Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

4th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

KNOWN BY GOD, I LOVE

What is your purpose? Held and known by God of such a great love, are you called to love as well?

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Psalm 71:1-6](#); [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#); [Luke 4:21-30](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"These readings are about being known and loved by God. They are about being called to speak God's truth and to love each other." Helene Tallon Russell



"We may not fit others' expectations, but God has been lovingly involved all along in making us who we are. God calls us to gift others simply by being ourselves." Charles Allen



In opening up to God we discover ourselves and become ready to realize new possibilities." Michael Miller

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

In **Luke 4:21-30**, Jesus has returned to Nazareth, where we might expect him to be heralded as a hometown hero and certainly to be well-known. But he receives no honor. Setting the context of this passage, Charles Allen reminds us that Jesus has just proclaimed the Jubilee year, the "year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19), that was meant to be enacted every 50th year. It is a year of celebration and rest. Debts are forgiven, lands are returned, captives are released and the poor are given a reprieve. But as Michael Miller reminds us, Israel was a captive nation. Allen imagines that the people must have looked at Jesus skeptically when he said, "Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). They might have thought, "Look around, there is no jubilee." We have no political or economic power to cause the haughty to be pulled down and overthrown. Those who are lowly are not being lifted up.

The people of Nazareth are confused about who Jesus is. They thought that they knew him: "Is this not Joseph's son?" (verse 22). Perhaps they thought he was getting beyond his upbringing—going around proclaiming prophetic messages and healing folks in neighboring towns. Who does he think he is? He is not fitting into their expectations, and they are "filled with rage" (verse 28) and seek to hurl him off the cliff. Yet Jesus simply walks away unnoticed. Allen observes that Jesus eludes them physically and spiritually. They do not comprehend who he is, what he doing or why he is there.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have been excluded from communities because we haven't fit the heterosexual norms. And perhaps we have even excluded members of our own community who haven't fit our expectations.



Who in the LGBT community have we sometimes excluded because he or she did not fit our expectations?

Yet God knows who we are more intimately than anyone else could know us. God's knowledge is deeper and more complete than that of our family, our parents, our hometown friends and even ourselves.

Here there is a direct connection with **Jeremiah 1:4-10** where God calls Jeremiah to be God's prophet. Jeremiah protests: "I am only a boy, I can't do it, I am inadequate, I ..." God interrupts and insists that God knows Jeremiah better than Jeremiah does, better than Jeremiah's mother or father does. God tells him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5). God knows Jeremiah better than anyone else does. And God knows each of us better than anyone else does. God knew us even before we came out, before we knew ourselves. Allen says that God is present in our very formation, including orientation. We

are all out to God. God calls LGBT people from the very beginning and knows us in every moment. We are consecrated by God and given the holy vocation of being fully ourselves. Sometimes just being who we are as LGBT people and witnessing to God's knowledge, love and acceptance of us in this world is our vocation, our calling. Being known is like coming out—being out is being known.



Can you recall a time when being known as an LGBT person was a relief? Have you felt that comfort in a community of faith? How can you enable others to feel safe enough to be known?

Psalm 71:1-6 echoes Jeremiah's feelings of unworthiness, only now they turn into feelings of absolute dependence and trust in God. The psalmist affirms that God chooses us from our very beginning to speak God's truth. God is our ever-present refuge from the world that shames us, our confidence in a weary fight against injustice and our stronghold in the climb up the seemingly unmovable rock of prejudice.



When have you felt weary of the fight against homophobia, sexism, racism or other prejudices? What was your prayer during such times? How can God be a refuge and strength in this struggle?

As Christians we are also called and commanded to love each other. The gospel is like an ellipse with two focal points. It proclaims the good news of grace and acceptance, and it commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves—to do justice and love mercy. In **1 Corinthians 13:1-13**, amidst bickering about whose spiritual gifts are best, Paul reminds the church that love is our chief vocation. God's love empowers us to love one another. I am known by God, and therefore I love.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God, Ever-Present Divine Lover,
Help us to remember that you are with and among us
at every moment—
God, you before us,
God, you behind us,
God, you beside us,
God, you below us,
God, you above us.
Empower us to be patient and kind,
to endure all things, hope all things, bear all things.
You are our stronghold and confidence now and forever. Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

5th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

HERE AM I; SEND ME!

While the struggle for self-understanding and self-acceptance is lifelong, God calls us to ministry at this time and for this moment.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Isaiah 6:1-8 \(9-13\); Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11](#)



WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"God is present and ready to call ordinary, deficient and scarred persons who appreciate the abundant grace of God into service." Michael Miller



"We may have been told that we are too base and unworthy to be in God's presence. We may feel that way ourselves. But God delights in our presence and calls us to share God's common life with the world." Charles Allen



"God uses us in the midst of our imperfections, without regard for the world's condemnation of us and in spite of our feelings of unworthiness. We are called to

act against injustice even when eradicating it seems impossible. We are called to act because resisting injustice is our vocation." Helene Tallon Russell

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Our reading from **Isaiah 6** pictures Isaiah as he is caught up in a theophanic — God-revealing — experience. He is overwhelmed with a sense of his creatureliness. In Scripture it is not unusual for an awareness of ourselves as creatures to be accompanied by feelings of unworthiness (verse 5). With lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, this basic sense of unworthiness is often compounded by the negative internalized feelings. Charles Allen points out that all this seems to be of no interest to God. Whatever Isaiah's deficiencies are, God still intends to draw upon Isaiah for God's purpose. In Isaiah 6:9-13, God has vastly more confidence in Isaiah than Isaiah does. The prophet is called to deliver a message and cope with not being heard! Today, might this be the message: God's people have the right of people to be fully themselves, to be treated justly and to have their humanity protected. Helene Tallon Russell is clear that the LGBT community has immense responsibility to act against injustice even when success is not likely, or not likely in our lifetime. The point of fighting for justice is that if we stopped doing it, we would stop being whom we are, whom God calls us to be.

Helene Tallon Russell also points out how liberating it is to hear that God acts (through the seraph in Isaiah 6:7) to remove Isaiah's shame and to assure him that his sin has been blotted out.



In what ways does preoccupation with your limitedness and unworthiness block you from communion with God? How does such preoccupation make it difficult for you to develop any sense of call? What do you want to pray to God about your sense of self and of your calling?

Notice the joy which is evident in the opening declarations of **Psalm 138**. These declarations should fill us not with overconfidence but humility. This being said, those who live with shame stemming from disparagement by others and unworthiness can easily become anxious that experiences of well-being and liberation are fleeting. They can find comfort in the psalmist's closing plea for God not to abandon the work already started (Psalm 138:8). Feelings of inadequacy can be exacerbated by the sense many in the LGBT community have of "walking in the midst of trouble," and of needing protection from hateful people (verse 7a). As distressing as all this is, however, the petitions of this psalm are made with confidence in God whose basic character is love, to love forever (verse 8a).



As God transformed Isaiah's self-perception through the seraph, might God be calling you to become an agent of health, strength and protection to those harmed by others or who harm themselves? What difference does God's love make in your responding to that call?

The theme of tension between our sense of unworthiness and awareness of grace continues into the New Testament readings and is the foundation of Paul's testimony and admonitions in **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**. Reminiscent of Isaiah, Paul claims his own unfitness for apostleship (verse 9). It is by grace, he says, that he is what he is. Surely this word suggests that openness to God's grace fosters graciousness to self and to others.

Paul's words invite us to carefully examine our sense of self and the depth of our hearts. Have we allowed God's grace to truly heal and transform us? Charles Allen points out that sometimes persecution by the church is connected to self-hating LGBT people — some acting out as they deny their sexuality. Michael Miller suggests that some people, with memories of failure and scars from disparagements, pursue an insatiable quest for approval through overachievement.

Notice that having confessed his own past persecution of the church, Paul attempts to establish his newfound credibility by indicating that he works harder than other apostles (verse 10). Here Paul appears like many in the LGBT community who work incessantly to prove to the wider community that they belong and are acceptable.



To what extent have you been able to receive and communicate God's grace through your acceptance of yourself and others?

Much effort is required to fight against violence and injustice, and to share the good news of Christ. However, the obsession to appear worthwhile can so dominate our efforts that they become counterproductive and self-destructive. LGBT people need to find rest in God's grace, and appreciate that they are exactly the kind of flawed and idiosyncratic people God has always called into service.

The connection between a sense of one's unworthiness, even sinfulness, and God's call is also explored in **Luke 5:1-11**. Simon (Peter), even in the pursuit of his livelihood, is just not getting it right. In the story, he comes to recognize the significance of the one in whose presence he is, and responds in a manner similar to Isaiah and Paul. He declares his sinfulness and attempts to distance Jesus (verse 8). In turn, Jesus simply responds: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (verses 10 and 11). Jesus does not pummel Peter with judgment, but receives him with his limitations and potential. The hope is that LGBT people will experience the presence of Jesus, hear his call and follow Simon's example: leave everything and follow him in trust and confidence.



What blocks you and your own community of faith from more faithfully fulfilling God's call?
What difference might an honest encounter with God make in accepting and fulfilling that call?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Loving God,
set us free to experience your abiding presence.
Despite loud and harsh words
that vilify and destroy,
open our ears and hearts to your welcoming voice.
Form us in your love. Send us to serve.
In the name of the one who calls us to follow,
in the name of Jesus, Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

6th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

BLESSED ARE

Just at first glance, you may not recognize a “blessed” life. Look closer. No matter the circumstance, God calls those who live life—fully, justly, faithfully—blessed.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Jeremiah 17:5-10](#); [Psalm 1](#); [1 Corinthians 15:12-20](#); [Luke 6:17-26](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"God's life with us is utterly life-giving, and we will know the blessing of that life only as we let ourselves be caught up in its rhythm, its fullness. God expects us to settle for nothing less." Charles Allen



"God is able to engender renewal in the most barren of circumstances." Michael Miller



"God calls us to believe the unbelievable, live in a way that the world rejects, trust in the unseen and rejoice in the apparent sorrow of current experience. We may be rejected by the world, but God's love is the true power that saves us for genuine life." Helene Tallon Russell

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

The readings this week don't seem especially comforting to hear. True, almost all of them speak of blessings. Helene Tallon Russell notes, however, they also speak of curses, threats and punishments. That sounds doubly harsh to those who have been singled out as people especially deserving of God's rejection. So it is all more crucial for anyone preaching from these texts to remind listeners that they are hearing them precisely because God's welcome is beyond question. The Jews and Christians who first collected these texts and called them "Scripture" did so in the assurance that they had already been inspired by a God of limitless compassion and patience. All of us can and should approach these texts with that same assurance.



When was a time you were especially confident of God's unconditional acceptance? If you have not been confident of such grace, what might hold you back from embracing that good news?

These passages cluster around a fundamental vision shared by Jews and Christians: God is utterly life-giving, and we know the blessing of that life only as we let ourselves be caught up in it. God expects us to settle for nothing less than our lives caught up in the fullness of God. To settle for anything less is a curse in itself, despite all appearances of things going well. The strange surprise, however, is that a life of faith, at first glance, may not appear blessed at all.

This is why Jesus in **Luke 6:20-22**, in the sermon on the plain, can make such an outrageous claim: those who are poor, hungry, sad or excluded are actually blessed. Why? Because of faith, we know there is more to life than the sum of our circumstances. We're ready to respond when told that we can find our lives in the life-giving God.

On the other hand, in **Luke 6:24-26**, those of us who are rich, well-fed, happy or popular are often not ready to respond to such a life-changing opportunity. When we simply settle for a life of privilege, we're actually cursed. We've insulated ourselves from much of the pain and suffering in the world, and in so doing we miss the intensity of living fully into the common, risen life that God offers. This life goes beyond any material circumstances. Make no mistake, however; Jesus is calling us to start living with justice and compassion, here and now (verses 27-31). Bless those who curse you. Love your enemies. Give to the poor. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (verse 31). For Jesus, especially Luke's Jesus, "matter" matters, this life matters. God's life-giving reign makes a material difference to material people.



Have you ever experienced grief or exclusion as a blessing? In what ways does your community of

faith share in the brokenness of those in your community? What about this week's readings seems most disturbing to you?

This vision of God's common, utterly life-giving life also animates in the writing of Jeremiah and the psalmist. In **Jeremiah 17:5-10**, those who have insulated themselves from that life, "who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength" (verse 5), are living in a wasteland. They, as expressed in **Psalms 1:4**, are "like chaff which the wind blows away." But those who find themselves caught up into God's common life are like a tree planted beside a stream (Jeremiah 17:8 and Psalm 1:3). They live life to its fullest intensity. Both Jeremiah and the psalmist present images of material prosperity (bearing fruit, leaves that do not wither), but both also know that things don't always work out that way for God's people. Like Jesus, they recognize that a faithful life, life in God, makes a material difference to material people here and now. No matter how long it takes, God brings justice, compassion and peace. God brings shalom.

In reflecting on these passages, Michael Miller offers the image of those who live in the wilderness and appear parched and "unworthy" can turn out actually to have deep roots by the stream. They live God's abundant life. They are the truly blessed ones. Through the image of a tree planted near the water mentioned earlier, Jeremiah and the psalmist might affirm this image as well.



What difference does your faith make in how you live in the "material world"? How does faith shape your understanding of the blessed, the good life? How do Jesus' words, and those of the psalmist and Jeremiah, influence your answers? Through these words, what might God be asking of your community of faith?

Paul's argument for the resurrection of the dead in **1 Corinthians 15:12-20** may seem out of place set beside these other texts. It does not fit smoothly with them. But Paul's argument is part of a longer argument about the importance of risen bodies, not immortal souls. Risen bodies may be more than flesh and blood, but they are still bodies, and the life to which we will be raised will not be one that leaves the material world behind.

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



God of life,
call us away from settling for anything less than life at its fullest.
God of justice,
forgive and challenge us,
bring us to right relationship with you and all those who suffer.
God of blessing,
here and now, inspire us to live lives
of healing, compassion and shalom.
Amen.

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Out in Scripture

An honest encounter between LGBT lives & the Bible.

Transfiguration Sunday, Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

SHINING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Transfiguration Sunday reminds us that like Jesus, we stand in God's presence, our faces shining with the love of God.

This week's lectionary Bible passages:

[Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36 \(37-43\)](#)

WHO'S IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation among the following scholars and pastors



"As people of faith who stand with integrity in God's presence, we should never be afraid to shine as witnesses to our authenticity and to God's love for us." Anne Dunlap



If we believe that fear and love are opposites, then before reading these passages we need to choose carefully whether or not we truly believe being in the presence of God would be terrifying or overwhelmingly ecstatic. Perhaps, however, it is a paradox — terror and ecstasy at the same time." Derek Krehbiel



God's intention is that we can all become more like the Divine. The transfiguration of Jesus shows us what such divinity might look like." Sara Rosenau

WHAT'S OUT IN THE CONVERSATION

A conversation about this week's lectionary Bible passages

Psalm 99 introduces the relationship between humanity, earth and God as intensely physical, even sensual. Humanity and earth both tremble as God is recognized in full majesty (Psalm 99:1). That passionate relationship is reinforced by the psalmist's description of God as the "lover of justice" in verse 4. "Justice" in this case is something external to God, allowing God to interact with it, like a lover. Being a lover of justice could be understood as an appreciation of justice in modern secular terms (as dog lover or art lover), intense and yet not erotic. However, the passion and intensity of the rest of the language in Psalm 99 (tremble, quake, speaking through a pillar of cloud) invites us to a deeper understanding. Psalm 99 offers a vision of God and justice intertwined like lovers, with "equity" and "righteousness" (verse 4) as divine offsprings of the passionate embrace.

Yet justice, equity and righteousness may seem abstract concepts compared to the physical trembling and quaking of humanity and creation in verse 1. How can justice, equity and righteousness be experienced through the senses, sensual and erotic? Psalm 99:6 recalls how Moses, Aaron and Samuel cried out to God and God "answered them . . . spoke to them from pillar of cloud." The psalmist evokes a God that is in relationship with humanity through our visual and auditory senses ("hearing" God's answer, and "seeing" the "pillar of cloud").

God's answer "to the cries of the priests, prophets and humanity over all is that our God is . . . a forgiving God to [us], but an avenger of [our] wrongdoings" (Psalm 99:8). In the presence of God, we are assured that while there will be consequences for our wrongdoings, our essential worth is affirmed through God's forgiveness. We are all called into accountability — both those who persecute the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, and LGBT people themselves.

We respond to God's justice with an involuntary physical and spiritual "tremble," as we recognize with our whole beings that we are in the presence of and in appropriate relationship to God. The trembling of our whole beings in relationship with another is similar to our experience of intense sexual pleasure, yet in this case it is beyond our experience of human-to-human contact. Our tremble is a sensual, even erotic, response to being in right relationship with the God who loves justice and humanity so passionately.



Have you experienced the presence of God through the gifts of your physical and sensual being? What are possible connections between God's presence through the sensual and physical with God's work of justice?

The Exodus, 2 Corinthians and Luke readings for this day pick up on the psalmist's theme of a physical, corporeal response to being in the presence of God. Where the psalmist describes the trembling body, these passages paint the shining, glowing, transfigured face as the ecstatic sign

of standing in the presence of a loving God. The archetype for such a transformation is Jesus.

Luke 9: 28–36 articulates Jesus' transformation in the story of the Transfiguration, which is unique in several ways from other Gospel accounts in Mark and Matthew. First, Jesus takes the posture of prayer. Luke notes that Jesus goes up to the mountain to pray (verse 28) and, as a result of prayer, "the appearance of his face changed" (29). Luke's gospel emphasizes that when Jesus dwelled in God's presence he began to look different. His face and clothes glowed, signifying his communion with God. Also here in Luke, it is interesting to note that like in Gethsemane (Luke 22:45), the disciples seem to get very sleepy whenever something important is about to happen for Jesus. Sleep is symbolic of a loss of faith and is indicative of the generally melancholy way we stumble through life without intention or purpose. When Peter, James and John become fully awake, however, they are able to see Jesus for who he is, illuminated by God's love for him.

The disciples respond to the sight of Jesus in his glory in a familiar way — with fear. Peter's solution is to make sense of the experience quickly and come to a decision. You can almost imagine him in a congregational business meeting. "This is good," he would say. "Let's make a motion to celebrate this day from now on. Please be sure it's in the minutes."

God's call on our lives, however, is so much more than a motion to mark one moment in time. God's call is to live fully authentic lives in God's presence. God surrounds the disciples with the cloud of God's presence — recalling **Exodus 34:29-35** in which God is present to the wandering Israelites in a cloud. Not only Jesus, but also the disciples, now "fully awake," discover themselves in God's presence. God says to listen to Jesus, the transfigured Jesus, as an example of standing fully authentic in God's presence.



When have you experienced a moment when you found yourself in God's presence, and became fully awakened to your authentic God-given self? What difference does an experience and awareness of the real presence of God make in your own sense of who you are?

In **2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2**, "all of us" (verse 18), like the disciples in Luke's Transfiguration, are being transformed and reflect God's glory in our "unveiled" faces. This reference to the veil recalls Moses' own experience of transformation in Exodus 34:29-35. Care must be taken when interpreting Paul's words in 2 Corinthians not to promote an anti-Semitic attitude toward Judaism. Paul was Jewish and the early church at this time had not yet distinctly split from its Jewish roots. What might be read as a critique by Paul of Jewish practice should be understood as a critique of his own tradition from his own insider's perspective.

In addition, Paul seems to remember the details of the Exodus story in his own distinct way. He seems to imply that Moses is constantly veiled from the people of Israel. Exodus, however, is quite clear that when Moses comes down from the mountain with his face shining brilliantly, he does not put on the veil until after he has spoken the word of God to the people (Exodus 34:33). Afterward, Moses takes the veil off to speak with God, and to report back to the Israelites what had been commanded. "The Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was

shining" (verse 35).

Why Moses ever puts the veil on to begin with remains unclear. The text suggests the people are afraid of such brilliant authenticity. Perhaps the veil is a pastoral response to a people with enough fear on their plate. Nevertheless, Moses appears to insist that the people do look upon him and his shining face as proof that he has been face-to-face with God.

We can see that the 2 Corinthians and Exodus passages actually agree. Both texts testify to the visible change evidenced in the faces of those who stand in the presence of God. Those who are in God's presence should not hide or veil that fact. Occasionally it might be necessary to "veil" — to "dim the glow" as it were — out of an authentic pastoral concern (but not, we note, out of an individual's own fear). Exodus suggests, however, that such an act must be at best a temporary move, and that the people must see the shining face of one who has been in the presence of God.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul (in his enthusiasm perhaps momentarily forgetting human nature) pushes us further, indicating that Christ reminds us that access to God is not limited (which is always Paul's point): we are all face-to-face with God, at all times, and so we all shine with God's glory. Thus there is really no need to be veiled.

For LGBT folks and their friends, the Exodus and 2 Corinthians passages call us to strongly stand in our authenticity and not be afraid to show our faces. We are to glow with the light of God. For others, the challenge is to look into those faces and see the presence of God reflected there.



In what ways might LGBT folks and their supporters "veil" themselves — cover up God's glory shining through us — in front of others, or even God? What would it mean to remove that veil? Is there ever a time when veiling might be appropriate?

PRAYERFULLY OUT IN SCRIPTURE



Holy One,
your face and clothes are glowing.
Your light is a beacon on a hill,
and should not be covered.

Holy One,
we stand face to face with you,
we stand in your presence.
We tremble with fear,
and yet your glory brings us to ecstasy.

Holy One,
Shine through us.
Help us reflect our own glory.
Shine throughout all your creation.
We praise you, Giver of Light.
Amen.

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