

Reflected Glory

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Matthew 2:1-12

Merry Christmas, for one day more. Perhaps it's a time to remember a bit of Auden's great poem called "For the Time Being:

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --  
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school. There are enough  
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --  
To love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers...

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware  
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are...

... In the meantime

There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,  
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem  
From insignificance..."

So Merry Christmas, for one day more, with our task being to redeem time from insignificance.

And Happy New Year, 2020, a new date to write on a check, if you still write checks, with a hymn that I love that we will not sing today, but could:

All beautiful the march of days,  
As seasons come and go.  
The hand that shaped the rose has wrought  
The crystal of the snow,  
Has sent the hoary frost of heav'n,  
The flowing waters sealed,  
And laid a silent loveliness  
On hill and wood and field.

O God, from whose unfathomed Law  
The year in beauty flows,  
Yourself the vision passing by  
In crystal and in rose,  
Day unto day shall utter speech,  
And night to night proclaim,  
In ever changing words of light,  
The wonder of your name.

And to the point, happy day before the day of Epiphany, which we will mark and explore this morning, “epiphany” being in general a moment of revelation or insight and for us that revelation and insight being the manifestation of the baby Jesus as the Christ to the three wise people, who followed a star.

It is a story that transfixes us – who were these three, about whom the text says so little? What was this star, about which the text says so little but which produces such joy? What about those gifts? What do they mean? And what of Herod, already sensing a threat from this little baby, and such solemn foreshadowing? There is a career of sermons contained in these few verses, and a lifetime of faithfulness to be lived out in the ways that we follow the star and recognize the baby and offer our gifts.

Before the Eagles beat the Seahawks later this afternoon, spend a few moments reading all of Auden’s Christmas poem, or this, T.S. Eliot’s effort, which reminds us that this story, like life itself, is never as simple as the Hallmark Channel would have us understand. Here’s a snippet of “The Journey of the Magi:”

“A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year

For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'  
...And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly..."

And it can seem like folly, if we are not mindful. We live in such a fragile moment. Military escalation in the Middle East. Impeachment proceedings unfolding, all and more reminders that the baby Jesus was born into a political world, as the machinations and maneuverings with Herod and the three mysterious visitors remind us. Fires intensify in Australia. Anti-Semitism escalates, marked by the horrendous Hanukkah attacks in Rockland County, New York. The United Methodist Church is poised for major schism over matters of human sexuality. We live in such a fragile moment, and following a star to meet a baby can seem like folly. And yet it is our hope, our best hope and the world's best hope, that the alternative road taken by the three wise men becomes the way we follow.

We lived in Chicago for many years, and each December the world-renowned Adler Planetarium would offer a show on this star, the astronomical point being how this could happen. I think it was a good money-maker for them, but more so, scratched an itch for followers and believers and seekers.

The three wise men inquired to Herod about the child, because they observed his star at its rising. Herod's plotting begins; even he was curious about the star. The three followed it. Then this most extraordinary moment: "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Overwhelmed with joy. They presented their gifts – another sermon for another time – and then departed, but by another way because of Herod's threat – again, another sermon for another time.

As interesting as a planetarium display is, and as much as it matters for us to seek understanding of all that is going on, the star had one job, and it did it well – to lead these visitors to Jesus, and to continue to lead us to Jesus.

First *to* Jesus – that’s what Epiphany is about. And that’s the first thing this light does – it provides illumination for our own lives – truth, and then truth beyond truth. I like to think of how those three were transformed by all this, what curiosity led them there, and then, having had this encounter, returning home by an alternative route. Recognizing the power of this tiny, little baby, being overwhelmed with joy, offering their precious gifts, how were they transformed? How did this encounter change the ways they lived the remainder of their days?

Likewise, how are we transformed? This isn’t at all about New Year resolutions, which we may or may not still be keeping five days in. No, this is about the deeper matters of who we are and how we will live our lives and how will the light of this baby, God-in-the-flesh, will make a difference in our lives.

These are not easy matters, nor should they be. Transformation is never about surface-level change. Rowan Williams, theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes that: “God is ‘the light of the world’ in his Son Jesus, yet that interruption, that light cutting through our darkness, is not a comfortable clearing up of problems and smoothing out of our difficulties and upsets...(When God’s light breaks on my darkness) I have to find a new way of knowing myself, identifying myself, uttering myself.” (*Ray of Darkness*, page 100)

That’s what Epiphany does. It is light cutting through our darkness, for each of us, a new orientation, for our own lives. But it doesn’t stop there – it can’t.

Because after leading us *to* Jesus, the star then leads us *from* Jesus to all the places where Jesus calls us, where this light needs to shine, so that we, like the star itself, become light-bearers, carriers of light. We are not Jesus; one Christ is plenty, and enough! But we can be, and are called to join, the countless pilgrims and pioneers who follow the star, and having experienced its light, now share it, in all the dark places of the world, in all the broken places, providing what light does, illumination and clarity and understanding.

We know the needs. I've mentioned the current litany, the all-too-familiar litany. We look at it and can almost feel immobilized, demoralized.

And yet...A friend recently said to me that whenever she feels overwhelmed by the headlines, she re-commits herself to make a difference in the corner of the world she occupies, in her work, in her relationships, to share light where and how she can.

What if that became our first commitment? What difference would that make in the spheres and spaces we occupy? And then to take all those particular commitments, all those points of light, and harness their collective and accumulating power for broader transformation in church and culture.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Allow me a paraphrase: "Never doubt that a small group of seekers and followers, who have seen the light and have been overwhelmed with joy, can change the world."

Change the world. That's what this light empowers us to do.

Do you remember 20 years ago (some of you will remember better than others!) when anxiety was fairly off the charts about what would happen when the calendar flipped from 1999 to 2000. Would banks implode? Would planes fall from the sky? Y2K. Do you remember?

In some ways, the artificial passing from 2019 to 2020 has that relative feel, to scale, yes, but with a deep and concerning set of global and cultural and political and theological issues. The environment. Tribalism and factionalism, of all kinds. An epidemic of gun violence. Race and poverty. And yet the church gathers, this church gathers, perhaps with a diminished measure of cultural influence but no less diminished in our capacity to share the light.

At the end of the year, I read stories of churches paying off medical debt for communities of need, of hard yet hopeful conversations about racism and white privilege and white supremacy, of churches partnering with public schools, of churches converting once overflowing buildings into needed senior housing. None

of those might be our specific strategies, but all of them share a sense of vision about what the light can do, what difference it can make in a world hungry for justice and reconciliation and hope – and joy.

Years later, when this baby to whom we offer gifts will be grown to be a man, he tells his followers that they are the light of the world. That is our vocation and our mission, set in motion long before his birth, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” confirmed when the star rests above his resting place.

The late writer Brian Doyle affirmed that “We’re only here for a minute. We’re here for a little window. And to use that time to catch and share shards of light and laughter and grace seems to me the great story...”

The poet Mary Oliver, who died just a few months ago, reminded us that “You, too, have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.”

Merry Christmas. Happy New Year. In the meantime, and for the time being, may we catch and share shards of light. May we shine. For the sake of the baby whom we worship and adore, and for the sake of the world he loves so much. Amen.