

Sermon on Epiphany Sunday 2020

(Matthew 2:1-12)

*Saints for the Comfortable*

I'm sure there will be a pastor or priest or two who will stand up this morning and say something like, "well, this will never happen again, Epiphany Sunday in the Year 2020: 2020 Vision, I suggest a church theme song, "I Can See Clearly Now." Some might even hum the first few bars.

Of course, I would never do that...

From what I wouldn't do to what I have done: I remember the first time I looked up at the Middle East sky, it was an October night in 1983. I was absolutely blown away by the clarity, the brightness, the sheer multitude of stars visible.

Indeed, in all the eons of human existence, 10's of thousands of years, except for the last one hundred years or so, in certain urbanized centers flooded with electric light, humans have never forgotten to look up and have never failed to be awed by the night sky.

Many of the ancients developed the study of the stars as a science, as religion, as art, even. They believed that the whole world, creation, was interconnected, and when something important happened on earth one could reasonably expect it to be reflected in the heavens and vice versa.

This is the root of astrology, both ancient and modern. Interestingly enough, though most scientists who study the heavens are not convinced astrologers, as neither am I, they do believe, again, in the interconnectedness of all things via quantum physics.

Scholars have laboured to discern what the "star" mentioned in the story of the Magi might have been, was it Halley's comet? Probably not since that appeared about 12-11 BC.

It could have been some kind of comet or it might have been the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Jupiter was considered a "royal star" and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews.

The overlap of the two might have meant to some serious astrologers that a King of the Jews had been born.

We don't for sure if for one of these scenarios or if for reasons more mystical, the magi made their journey but whatever the case Matthew doesn't tell us this story to merely satisfy our astronomical curiosity.

Nor does Matthew offer up the cozy crèche scene augmented by gentle oriental princes bringing gifts to a child in a stable.

Matthew doesn't say anything about a stable; by the time these visitors arrive (Matthew also doesn't say they were princes), Mary and Joseph were probably simply residing somewhere in Bethlehem.

The overtones of his story are quite different. There is political dynamite in what follows. And because it's political, there is personal challenge in what follows as well.

The House of Herod, whether the old Herod, who died around the time of Jesus' birth or his sons who were still around throughout Jesus' life, were all imposters and pretenders, imposed on them through a series of shady deals with Rome.

The Jews knew it, but most of the elites had made an uneasy peace with them as long as they themselves were supported by the King.

The same sort of uneasy peace that exists between those with power and economic clout in every society at any time, including in our own country.

It is how this bipedal mammal has always "organized." I was watching the Irishman by Scorsese over the holidays; the movie about the Teamsters, Jimmy Hoffa and the mobster who claimed to kill him, Frank Sheeran, and you realize that even the structures that are supposed to empower the average worker also participate in these corruptions.

Without being too dramatic about it one could name any empire, nation, city or village, put a colon after it and the words "unjust society" and you'd not be wrong: Judah, circa 2 AD: unjust society; Canada: unjust society; Abbotsford/Chilliwack: unjust society; though of course you'll not hear that at the Mayor's prayer breakfast.

I don't mean to cast dispersions and we must, of course, recognize that such things come in degrees.

But because of Christmas, because of the birth we celebrate, we recognize that it is precisely into these circumstances that God comes!

When we dare to see clearly (forgive me!), to stop pretending that everything is okay, when we dare open our Epiphany eyes we can view what is and still be filled with new hope.

The arrival of the astrologers, who are not Jewish, introduces us to something that Matthew wants us to be clear about from the start: If Jesus is in some sense the King of the Jews, that doesn't limit his rule to a particular ethnic group.

This is, he wants to say, is the beginning of the spread of God's peace and justice to the whole world in fulfillment of the prophecies, applying to all unjust societies.

Matthew will end his gospel by extending this infinitely, by telling us that Jesus commissioned his first followers, and therefore you and I, to go into all the world and make other followers of himself.

This is a super-charged challenge in a post-Christendom, multicultural society! We want God's peace and justice to spread, but we want it to somehow "just happen."

But the New Testament knows only one way toward that goal, there must be at least significant bands of thoughtful, engaged followers of Jesus in every place and within every ethnic and cultural expression.

How might such a reality be different from colonization, from cultural genocide, from a hiding of all our significant differences? All great questions with no easy answers.

I, for one, find the classic conservative answer highly problematic: convert the heathen: conform everyone to the same belief system. We've tried that in the past and it ends up badly.

But frankly, I can't buy the classic liberal "live and let live" answer either. Beliefs matter, and besides, liberals believe that we *should* change people's belief systems on any number of issues.

Whatever else it might mean, the spreading of Christ's light and vision is political, it's about a vision of God's justice and peace becoming more visible in all societies and that challenge lands on your doorstep and mine.

Personally, it's about opening our eyes, again; daring to see God's truth. Perhaps it means opening our hearts to learn from each other in unexpected ways, the ways these incredible men from the East did.

The more I think about them and what they did and how they did it, the more I'm challenged, the more I'm moved by them. So much so, that I'm reimagining them in my mind as the iconic saints of Western Christendom.

I say that because as almost all sociologists will agree, it's not the downtrodden, the persecuted or the marginalized that are difficult to motivate; if given the chance they will act!

The hardest people to change, the least likely to engage in adventure (and I'm not talking about European holiday here!), the least likely to embrace deep personal change at risk to themselves are the comfortable.

This is what sunk the Roman empire and what sinks the Western Church in our own day, we love our creature comforts, our little hobbit homes, our cups of tea and our gas lit fireplaces.

Volunteer a couple of hours a week with those less fortunate? That's for someone else; ask myself hard questions around what needs to change? Not so much. Develop my spirituality? that might cut into my Netflix time!

But here were wealthy men, if the gifts they gave tell us anything, if the journey they went on with all its expenses gives us clues.

And yet they put themselves in harm's way for the sake of truth, for the sake of the divine call to discover, for the sake of taking their part in participating with God's desire for the Light to spread!

They overcame, with God and each other's help, the sinkhole of creature comforts! So there's hope for all of us!

Which tells us, of course, that we don't truly see, until we act. The Magi saw something, but their sight would never have been fulfilled unless they had embarked on the journey for the ages.

Our courageous journeys may take many forms; they may include reaching out from our comforts toward others, maybe family members or friends or neighbours we know we should help (remember the Samaritan!).

It may be journey in which we engage with a pressing issue such as climate change and seriously reimagine what it means to live more in tune with our earth's pain.

You could, I'm sure, name many courageous journeys. Not one of them is comfortable, at least at first, but in the end they bring incalculable meaning and the knowledge that we too are becoming "wise people," spreading the light.

How then will you journey? What route will you take to come to him?

Will you dialogue with friends and fellow parishioners about it? The magi needed each other, so will we!

The journey will only mean something if you bring your best to it, signified in our story by the preparation, by the commitment and by the gifts the magi brought. How will you know it's the right journey? You will find Him and you will be filled with awe and worship; you will be alive!