

Sermon TSP Epiphany - First After Christmas Year A 01 January 2017

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. **Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.** Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. **They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.** *NRSV Isaiah 60:1-6*

Psalm 72

- 1 Give the king your justice, O God, *
and your righteousness to the king's son;
- 2 That he may rule your people righteously *
and the poor with justice.
- 3 That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, *
and the little hills bring righteousness.
- 4 He shall defend the needy among the people; *
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.
- 5 He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, *
from one generation to another.
- 6 He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, *
like showers that water the earth.
- 7 In his time shall the righteous flourish; *
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus **for the sake of you Gentiles**— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and **how the mystery was made known to me by revelation**, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the **Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.** Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and **to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things**; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was **in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord**, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. *NRSV Ephesians 3:1-12*

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? **For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.**" **When King Herod heard this, he was frightened**, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"** Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, **they were overwhelmed with joy. On**

entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. NRSV Matthew 2:1-12

“Light in Strange Places”

The story of the Epiphany carries with it nostalgic and beloved images of camels, exotic travellers from a strange, foreign country, extravagant gifts, a great moving star - there's even a little astrology thrown in! And Epiphany is very special to me, because it marks the anniversary of my ordination. But this is much more than a quaint old story - today's readings all blend together beautifully and intricately, to make an **enormous** claim as we enter the Epiphany season. And that claim is fairly straightforward. It rings down through the centuries from the prophet to the Psalm, through St. Paul's writing to the Church at Ephesus, and into Matthew's gospel. ***The claim is this: God is carrying out God's intention for the world in the revelation of that beautiful, bright star - not just for a few chosen people, but for the WHOLE WORLD. Remember how God promised Abraham that God would bless all people of all nations through his family? Well apparently, God wasn't kidding.*** Isaiah says it first ... *“Arise! Shine! For your light has come....nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn... they shall bring Gold and Frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”* The claim continues in today's Psalm.

This is a royal psalm about the Judean kings. What we **usually** hear about these kings is how they messed up, but notice this **positive** spin, this **hopeful** language about how the kings will rule *“Give the king your justice, O God, that he might rule your people righteously, and the poor with justice.”* Now, these royal Psalms were kept and used 500 years after the Judean kings were gone, so the challenge is to hold out this hope for our **own** kings and presidents and prime ministers and MPP’s and Mayors in our **own** time. We’re always praying for them, but do we dare to trust that **they also** could be touched by the light from the star? Do we dare to imagine that the justice, peace, love and forgiveness that God intended for **all nations** could actually reach **our** leaders and influence **their** policy decisions? That’s a tough one - but it’s one that we can help along significantly by being a constant respectful but challenging voice for public justice.

This Epiphany claim continues in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Paul affirms God’s intention to **include the Gentiles** in the mysterious revelation of God - he reminds us that we are **all** drawn into this revelation by grace. And in being drawn toward that light, absolutely **everyone** becomes a precious heir, a **full** member of the body of Christ. We’re all drawn together to **participate** in the revelation that the star brought. Our role is then to **actively reveal God to others**. But again, the key point is that the invitation to follow the star is extended

beyond the religious and racial boundaries that we humans create. The Epiphany light shines down on **everyone**. And finally, Matthew's gospel gets right into the story of how God **shared** the light of revelation. . So enter, **Balthasar** of Arabia, **Melchior** of Persia, and **Gaspar** of India ... these wise men represent three racial ethnic groups with whom the Hellenistic society would have been familiar. So it would have been clear to the readers that **everybody** was invited into the light of revelation.

For me, the best part of this story is how God used something **utterly foreign and unknown** to invite everyone in. God got the attention of those wise travellers through something they knew. They knew the **stars**. That's how **they** sought God. That's where **they** looked for guidance and wisdom. And you and I - the ones who inhabit Church Land - can either get really nervous, or have a good laugh at the wonderful humour in what God is doing here in by-passing the religious elite.

So how do we interpret this huge Divine claim that echoes down through the centuries? What do we **do** with it? There are fifty sermons here, in prophecy being fulfilled, and Herod's fear, deceit and violent reaction, and the whole concept of a journey of faith - there are **so** many threads we could pick up. But today, let's focus in on **two**

things..... First, let's talk about how God made this massive, holy revelation ***through the wrong people***. Here in Church Land, we can get pretty possessive about almost **everything**, from liturgy to furniture to theology. We tend to think we have things under control, and then God goes and shows up in ways we don't understand. The fact that God chose these foreign astrologers to recognize the holy light challenges some of our deepest assumptions about who **gets** what God is doing. Maybe God is present and active in all kinds of people and places where we don't expect to encounter the holy. I'll never forget the class in seminary when the Professor said, "*Believe it or not, the church as we know it does NOT have a monopoly on God.*" He told us that God was very busy working in people outside our walls, and that we'd better find a way to **recognize** that. And this lesson can be broken down further into something as simple as someone new joining a study group or a committee - someone who questions an **old** idea or brings us a **new** one. Can we see God working in something new and different, or would we prefer to remind them that we've always done it this way? Today, we are challenged to open our eyes much wider - to discern God's work in new and strange places - to see God's face in everyone around us.

And second, let's talk about ***our response*** to the Epiphany revelation.

The Magi saw the light and dropped everything to follow it, at great personal cost. It meant a long, hard journey and there was an element

of danger. Their response was joyful celebration at what God was doing. Herod's counsellors knew about the prophecies, but the wise men did not. And still, without a solid theological background - without the religious language of the Jews - they recognized God in a star and they followed. So fast forward to you and me here and now. We love this story. We sing praises to God for sending the light. But what do we **do** with it? You know, intellectual assent to the light won't cut it. We're called to risk something, just like the Magi. We're called to let the light **in**, and see what hard **changes** it brings. But then comes the **real** challenge - we're **also** called to **let the light out**. And here's where it gets hard. Matthew's gospel **ends** with Jesus' command to "*go make disciples of all nations.*" And I hate to remind us of this, but that command is directed at you and me too. **Those** disciples are dead, may they rest in peace. And now it's **our** turn. Natural Church Development surveys tell us that this is the **single hardest thing** for mainline Anglicans to do. We don't know how to share the light. We don't know how to put our spiritual journey into plain words outside these walls, even though our personal faith may run very deep. We tend to be very **private** about our faith. It's nobody's business what we do on Sundays - it's nobody's business what we believe. We get queasy at the very **thought** of anyone seeing us as an Evangelist or a Bible Thumper or a Jesus Freak. And rightly so - like I often say, I **run away** from those

people on the streets! But still, the fact is that this commandment to share the revelation of the Epiphany star with the people around us - this commandment **is** aimed directly at you and me. We talk about numbers and we hope for growth. And we try to dream up all kinds of ways of attracting people to our services. But the reality is that nobody is **ever** going to know what's offered here, unless you and I **tell** them. **Invite** them. **Share** with them (in a respectful, sensitive way - **not** like a Bible Thumper) **share** with them what your faith **means** to you - what **brings** you here - the **good** things about being part of a community that tries to grow spiritually, and to help our neighbours. The hard truth is that no one **person**, no one magic program or event can grow the church. Every **one** of us needs to reach out in relationships if we hope to grow. And another hard thing to think about is the fact that numbers are not the whole story when it comes to growth. You can have a packed church with great entertainment, but little personal spiritual engagement. And you can have a tiny, struggling church with deeply committed, spiritually growing people who are being wonderfully transformed. Growth is more complex than just the numbers. We'll talk more about that another time, but coming back to our challenge to learn how to **share** our spiritual stories, let me ask you this question... What is it for **you**? What brings **you** back here again, time after time? Is it friendships? Is it prayer? Is it music? Is it teaching? Is it being free to

explore difficult questions? Does hearing about the things Jesus said and did inspire you? Does rolling up your sleeves to help seniors or to support The Compass give you a sense of purpose? The very hard thing for us to realize is that if we can't **articulate**, with some degree of quiet confidence, what **brings us** to this gathering, we cannot hope that others will just randomly show up. It's through relationship that community is built. It's through relationship that the body of Christ grows. Having wonderful, enticing spectacular events can be a lot of fun and a really good thing...it might even **attract** someone for the moment. But if **you and I** are not convinced of the value of gathering around Teaching, Book, Prayer and Table every week - if **you and I** can't find a way to share with a close friend or relative what it **means to us** - then there's not much of a chance that anyone **else** will be convinced. Just a couple of decades ago, almost **everyone** went to church. It was just what you **did** - what **everyone** did. It was part of the social culture. But that social culture has changed. People now talk about being spiritual but not religious....many say they find God in nature and in helping out at the Food Bank, rather than in liturgy. Most millennials have **no** experience or language of liturgy. But I firmly believe that a person can walk through those doors and have a **deep** experience of the Transcendent God in our liturgy. And I further believe that their experience of the holy, will be enhanced by the loving welcome of a

warm community. Once the renovations to our building are well underway, we're going to have a Parish Retreat so we can talk together about this sort of thing. But today, let's take this challenge home with us - let's take it seriously. We have chosen to let the Epiphany light **in**, and we are called to let it **out** -- to let the light shine for others to see. Let's go home and talk with God about how we can entice others in, by simply and naturally **sharing** what the light has done for **us**.

Friends, you and I have been drawn in by the powerful Epiphany star - that star that revealed God's intention to **save** us. To **heal** us. To give us **life**. To make all people **one**. To bring peace and blessing to a broken world. Those three wise men from foreign countries were drawn in first. And they followed the light until they found the Child. And they offered their **gifts**, not reluctantly but with joyful celebration at what God was bringing to **all people** of **all nations** through that Child. So let's follow that Star to the Child. Let's offer up the gifts that **we** have been given. And through those gifts, let's shine on that light wherever we go.

.....sing with me.....

O come, let us adore him

O come, let us adore him

O come, let us adore him

Christ the Lord!

Happy New Year!