

## Epiphany Sermon – Jan. 2, 2022, Matthew 2:1-12

The season of Epiphany begins on January 6 – after the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. As we are unlikely to have a special Epiphany service on Thursday, I thought we might consider this theme today.

Epiphany – Revelation – I prefer “manifestation” – it gives the Season a wider dimension and invites us, like Mary, to ponder what is happening when we behold the birth of Jesus.

Isaiah (ch. 60) sings of a time of blessing, of light shining forth upon Israel as the Exiles return from Babylon – a gift of the Persians who would later provide the Wisemen or Magi.

Light – God began creation with the gift of light – and we still associate Light with blessing, revelation, comprehension. Faith is opening ourselves to the light of Jesus’ presence.

Much has been written about Matthew’s description of the Magi following a star to Bethlehem, where they worship Jesus and offer 3 gifts fit for a King – Gold, of course, Frankincense – the precious scent of royalty; and Myrrh – a lotion – associated with healing but also with the preparation for burial.

Were there 3 Wisemen? We don’t know, just that there were 3 gifts. They were not Kings despite the Carol’s insistence. They were most likely Magi, Astrologers.

. . .

You would assume, of course, that women and men called to Ministry would eschew any contact with astrological charts.

But purely for the sake of research – you will understand! – I did some snooping via Google to see how I might fare in 2022. From the Times of India, it seems, I will become quite rich and, other than some undefined threats in June and September, it will be a wonderful year!

Well, we really don't believe this stuff – except – well – curiosity and all that . . .

Astrology was an important element of the Zoroastrian religion of Persia – one of the world's oldest faiths, and still has followers in Iran and the Middle East. (The Zodiac was well known in Israel in Jesus' time.) It teaches a distinct dualism between good and evil, light and darkness, and a strict morality. In ancient days, the Priests expected a child to be born who would bring light and salvation to the world.

Israel had an ongoing respect for Persia – first, for deliverance from the power of Babylon, and, later, as a world power to counter the influence of Rome.

Now Matthew is not leading his readers or us into some variance of Zoroastrianism. But he is guiding us to apprehend that God's manifestation in Jesus was not to be solely for the blessing of Israel, but for all people – the issue Paul takes up in Ephesians 3. We call it Grace!

This then, could be a just a lovely Christmas story to warm our hearts in this season, could it not? But there is someone else, Herod – often called Herod the Great – whose main preoccupation was keeping power. There is a quote I read from his contemporary, Emperor Caesar Augustus, who said that pigs were safer in Herod's court than his sons. No one was safe. So the news of a 'new king of Israel' was not news Herod wanted to hear.

I know I promise not to bring up any more stories of Malawi, but please indulge me once more.

At our first Christmas in Malawi, a youth group put on a nativity play. There was a lot more action and dialogue than we were accustomed to, which made it all the more interesting. It was long!!! And so after the Wisemen presented their gifts we were ready for the final carol. But then from the side arrived a group of soldiers who were shouting, beating people, and heading murderously towards the cradle. Mary grabbed her baby and with Joseph made a quick exit stage right while the mayhem continued.

I'm not sure I ever really recovered! The peace and serenity of the Bethlehem scene was totally demolished – and so it was . . . in real time - so it was!

Our society allows us to have a peaceful celebration of Christmas. We don't have Herod's soldiers to threaten us, but our contemplation is interrupted.

One of my favorite carols is 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' wherein Phillips Brooks pens the wonderful words . . . "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven." That's where I want to be - and where I want to stay.

But here come the advertisements, the noise and clamour of the market. Where did Santa and those Reindeer come from? Snowmen and elves? Alas.

But this is small stuff compared to the political noise roiling the international landscape. The thirst for power is again threatening the fragile peace and freedoms of many people – and often it is done in the name of religion!

- The unravelling of the fabric of American democracy is frightening. The lies and fabrications are one thing, but the underlying threat of violence is now palpable.
- We may say it is the right of anti-vaxxers to follow their delusions – but too often it is defended with threats, vulgarity and even violence.
- Two of the most (self-labelled) Christian countries in Europe - Poland and Hungary - are moving to totalitarian status.
- We cringe when news comes from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Ethiopia, Sudan, Hong Kong, Eastern China.
- All this is at play while the planet we live on is in peril – all life is threatened.

I have a clergy friend in Toronto and we try to keep in touch. Both of us spent years in Africa and he is just completing a documentary on the Biafran War. In his Christmas letter he noted that he has come to an age when he sees time and space differently. More time is past than ahead; and his glance now wants to look up and out and contemplate the meaning of it all.

He included a little chart which gives us some perspective: if we could move at the speed of light it would take:

1 second to reach the moon

8 minutes to reach the sun

20,000 years to exit our Milky Way Galaxy

46.5 **billion** years to reach the edge of observable space.

Epiphany offers us the opportunity to look into that night sky and to observe the stars aglow. To ponder the God who created all things; to think of our God as over and above and beyond all that we can see or comprehend.

Who are we, what are we, in the midst of this grandeur? – as asked the Philosopher in Ecclesiastes long ago.

At the same time we go to Bethlehem, to a stable, to peasant parents contemplating this child whose birth will change their lives and the life of the whole world. They ponder this blessing amidst the power, corruption, hatred, immorality, blind stupidity and arrogance of political and religious leaders.

From whence does our help come, asks the Psalmist? Our help comes from the Lord who made *heaven and earth*.

Being people of faith, being the people of Jesus, may yet be for us a disrupting experience in a dangerous world.

For what do we stand? Whom do we confess?

Let us look at the stars and ponder.

May we look at the cradle and believe!