

“A Word to Seekers”

Matthew 2:1-12

January 3, 2021

Much of life these days has a kind of apocalyptic feel to it—a sense of unraveling and chaos that threatens to overtake us. Even politicians and writers are using images that have a distinctively biblical feel. We’re two weeks into what has been described as a “very dark winter” or “the most difficult time in our nation’s health history.” The reality of collective grief hovers in our midst like gloom, low-hanging clouds that block any sign of distant light.

The fleeting hope of Christmas has come and gone, a new year has begun, and the difficult truth is that much about our lives and our world feels the same. And, just when we might be tempted to give in to the post-Christmas blues and communal despair, the church offers up one more holy day. Just when the nights are darkest and the days are shortest, we are reading and singing and preaching all about light. The timing of this day is at best paradoxical in a “normal” year—and there is nothing normal about the time in which we’re living.

How are we to mark this day of light in a winter of darkness? What might God be asking of us on this holy day?

I don’t know about you, but I always experience at least a little bit of a letdown as the joy and beauty of the holidays gives way to a long January gloom. Each year, I return to the vivid post-Christmas image described in W.H. Auden’s oratorio “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.
Once again,
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision
 and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away.

I am haunted by Auden’s words each year. Here, at the beginning of January, it’s back to the “real world,” the one that we left behind, if we were lucky, for a day or two over the holidays. Once again, we have sent Christmas away; packed up in boxes, and stored in the attic until next December. And this year, we may not even have the benefit of leftovers since those large family gatherings were yet another casualty of this dark winter.

And yet. We who spend the month of December and the season of Advent singing and praying and reading and hoping for light shining in the darkness must not send that light away so easily, so apathetically. There is something about that Vision that will not let us go even as we pack up boxes and lower expectations. There is something about *us* that longs for it even as we doubt its reliability. Auden describes it this way, “To those who have seen the child, however dimly, however incredulously, the time being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all. We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious; remembering the stable where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an It.”ⁱ

Today, as our calendars turn to another year, the church insists on Epiphany. The word describes a striking revelation or sudden insight. Mine usually come in the middle of the night or in the shower. I have always been grateful that I was ordained on Epiphany, thirteen years ago this week. On Epiphany, we hear again the story of those three seekers, magi, or kings, or wise men, who traveled from afar following a star to the place where the Christ child was. It is a beautiful and compelling story. The vision. The prophecy. The political intrigue. The journey. The star. The treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Epiphany is a testament to the church's conviction that the Christmas story does not end in a stable in Bethlehem. No, the Vision reminds us that the time being is the time that matters. The journey reminds us that we, like the wise men, are still seeking the truth that led them to worship with overwhelming joy.

I believe that we who might be tempted to give in to the post-Christmas letdown can take great comfort in the story of the wise men. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, they missed it. They were still many miles off and months away. They were duped by King Herod and surely dealt with all the complications and difficulties of holiday travel. How many of us can relate? How many of us longed to experience the joy of Christmas but simply could not get there...not this year? How many of us need another shot at Christmas joy and meaning?

Their story of the magi gives us this blessed assurance: it is not too late. What distinguishes these three is not their punctuality but their persistence. They didn't give up. They journeyed on. And in the seeking, they found truth and joy. The same can be true of we modern-day seekers.

A couple of weeks before Christmas, I received a message and an unusual question. The message came from Stewart Goodwin, an elder in our congregation and Executive Director of the Indiana War Memorial. Stewart is also a retired Brigadier General and very good at getting right to the point. "I need a religious perspective on a situation we're facing." He had my full attention. The situation was that the Downtown

Indy business community was requesting that the Christmas tree on Monumental Circle, which is owned and managed by the War Memorial, remain lit beyond Christmas and well into the new year. Stewart wondered how a pastor would feel about this, whether our faith tradition had any wisdom to offer or regulations to follow. This specific question has stayed with me and expanded in my mind in the weeks since Stewart called me. I called him just before Christmas to ask what had been decided. "Well, Pastor, I think you'll like the decision." Stewart shared that the "Shining a Light" production had been extended. A good choice. A witness to the reality that all of us need a little more light in our lives this year. That was just what I needed to hear because this is what I want to say to you this Epiphany Sunday.

That light shining in the darkness that we welcomed on Christmas morning, it has not gone out, but it has gone on. If we want to be people who walk in the light of Christ, we're going to have to follow it into an unknown future. So, please do keep those Christmas lights up in your homes and in your yards. Keep the candles lit. Keep shining the light into the darkness.

And, as you do that, don't stop looking for signs of light around you and beyond you. The traveling kings could have given up, but something propelled them forward. No longer content with standing still, they became seekers, following...following what? Matthew says it was a star; I believe it was also a vision; the Vision of one who would bring purpose beyond what they could imagine. They became seekers of the light.

This week, I've noticed a common theme both in my individual encounters and in the broader realm of media and commentary. There is a yearning among us. A deep desire for something different. I'll confess to a bit of cynicism about the outsized hopes expressed with the turning of the year this week. It is a bit strange, when you think about it, that this yearning, this desire is pinned on one particular day, no different than the day before it. But then a different thought entered my mind. What if this rising hope is more about us than the calendar?

Let me tell you a story. Once, there was a man

who had a dream of a heavenly city where everything was perfect. Weary of his own life, he decided to go in search of the heavenly city of his dreams. Gathering what few belongings he had, he set out on his journey. All day long he walked. And as he walked, he had but one thought: the heavenly city of his dreams - how perfect it would be when he arrived. All day long he walked with this one thought until evening came and he had not yet arrived at the heavenly city of his dreams. He decided to make camp right where he was. Taking out his crust of bread, he gave thanks to God and ate. And then just before he went to sleep, he took off his shoes and put them in the path facing them in the direction that he would continue his journey the next day. And, then, the man went to sleep.

Little did he know that in the middle of the night, a trickster came along, picked up his shoes, and turned them around, facing them back in the direction from which he had come. Early the next morning, the poor man awoke. Taking out his crust of bread, he gave thanks to God, ate, and then he walked to the path, and found his shoes. The man began to walk in the direction that his shoes were facing. All day long he walked, and as he walked, he had but one thought: the heavenly city of his dreams and how perfect it was going to be when he arrived. He walked until it was almost evening.

He looked off in the distance and he saw it! The heavenly city of his dreams! It wasn't as large as he thought it was going to be, and it looked strangely familiar. The man walked until he found a strangely familiar street, and he turned down the strangely familiar street, and he walked until he found a strangely familiar house. And he knocked on the door, and when the door was opened, he was greeted by a strangely familiar family. The man went inside and lived happily ever after in the heavenly city of his dreams.ⁱⁱ

Matthew says that the Magi, following the instructions of a dream, returned home by another way. I can only imagine that they also returned home as new people and that the home to which they returned did not

look the same either. Having seen the Vision, the light of God in all its glory, how could they not be changed?

It's just another day on the calendar. The darkness persists. The grief is still there. That's one way to see it. Here's another: something has shifted and changed. Everything can be different because it must be different. We are different. We have seen the Vision, witnessed the truth, been transformed by the light of God.

In his masterful, *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot writes:

With the drawing of this Love
and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.ⁱⁱⁱ

And...what a journey it will be! Happy Epiphany,
Second Church! Happy New Year! Amen.

ⁱ W.H. Auden, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" in *Collected Longer Poems*. Random House, 1934.

ⁱⁱ A version of this story appears in William R. White, *Stories for Telling: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1986. pp.92-96.

ⁱⁱⁱ T.S. Eliot, "For *Quartets*," <http://www.coldbacon.com/poems/fq.html>