

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Why follow the Star?

Epiphany is one of my favourite celebrations. For me the symbolism of it is right up there with Christmas. In my home I simply can't take down my decorations until I have celebrated Epiphany. (I guess I know what I'm doing this afternoon). Most probably don't even know Epiphany is coming and for many it is just another day, another story. In fact you may or may not be aware that Epiphany is actually on January 6th and today is actually Baptism of our Lord Sunday (I'm sure those at St. John's will be on that track because I know Nick would feel my nostalgia towards the star and following the light would be rather juvenile but never the less here I am being drawn towards the image in a way that I find enlightening and so you are stuck with epiphany today).

We've come to love the Christmas star so much. Even in the weeks before Christmas, you start seeing it everywhere. It's on bulletin covers and Christmas cards and the stole hanging around the preacher's neck.

A Christmas crèche may be part of your home or your church decorations, or it may not be...maybe your kids live halfway across the country, so you didn't even put the stockings on the mantle this year, but somewhere, you probably have a star. Quite often, it's at the very top of the tree--that star--the highest point in the living room.

Why do I enjoy this story so very much? Perhaps it is because it speaks to where we are in our season and in our culture. In the Northern Hemisphere, we are experiencing the darkness of midwinter. Days are short and nights long. The beauty of the snow wore off for most of us and the freezing rain brought us back to a reality we were not all looking forward to here in the rainforest. But more than the weather there are other forms of darkness—poverty, war, injustice, oppression, hatred, prejudice, fear—forms that also affect us just as they did the people of biblical times. In these passages, light breaks through the darkness: a prophet calls us to arise and see the light of liberation and peace, reconciliation and joy; if we were to have read all the lectionary scriptures you would have heard the psalmist pray for a ruler who will light the way of his people with righteousness, prosperity, and an end to oppression and injustice. The writer of Ephesians lights the way through mystery, with a message of the good news of Christ Jesus; and the Magi follow the light of a star, finding more than they were looking for, to return home transformed.

It's that last part that gets me. The point of following the star was not to just go out on a trek as a tourist it was to encounter a light that transforms our lives. One of the great things about having

young ones around in the Christmas season is that it brings us back to the excitement of it all. When children first see a Christmas tree in their home they are usually amazed by its sparkle and beauty. In the eyes of a young child, we see the wonder, curiosity, and joy that the lights bring. We all sometimes need to be reminded that we are God's children who need to come to the "light" as well. "Just as Jerusalem was to be the light on a hill for all nations to see God's glory, we need to come toward this "light" so that we too may be transformed by life in God's presence. This life in the presence of God should be one of wonder, curiosity, and joy, like that of a young child. By acknowledging and being transformed by the "light," we too can participate in God's kingdom. The essence of the passage is reflected in the hymn Arise, Your Light Is Come by Ruth Duck: "Show forth the glory of your God/Which shines on you today."¹

Transformation, healing and new life is what coming to the stable in Bethlehem is all about. The magi that took this journey must have known that otherwise why would they have gone to such effort risking their lives to greet this child? Perhaps it was also part of their mission, their life call to take these sacred, priceless gifts to this child. Gifts fit for a king. I have a new understanding of these gifts this year. I am surprised I didn't know a whole lot about what these gifts have to offer and I have to admit I was a bit shocked that with all the information out there the commentaries I read related to the scripture knew very little.

We can all understand bringing Gold - that is still prevalent enough in our culture that we understand bringing it to any birth if you could. Frankincense and Myrrh however? For all I knew is these were lovely perfumes one for the rich to fill their rooms warm aroma during life and myrrh used as a fragrance in burial. There is so much more to them however. Why Frankincense? I went to one of my new favourite websites so that I could share this with you some more (I should have Shannon Kerr doing this part of the sermon but I'll let you know what I have learned through my own research of the essential oils). "Known as the king of essential oils, Frankincense has a variety of notable uses and benefits. This powerful essential oil is revered for its ability to beautify and rejuvenate skin when applied topically, and to promote cellular health and immunity and produce a healthy inflammatory response when taken internally,* among other benefits. With all of its many uses, there is no question as to why Frankincense was highly esteemed by ancient civilizations and used for the most sacred of practices. For some religions, Frankincense is correlated with one of the most prized possessions of ancient biblical times...Frankincense was also used during religious ceremonies for salves for soothing skin and perfume. The perfume or aroma that Frankincense emits promotes feelings of satisfaction, peace, relaxation, and overall wellness, which explains its unique value in ancient times...With its strong aromatic properties, Frankincense oil is essential in giving a positive and focused lift to the rest of your day.

The list goes on One of Frankincense's most powerful benefits is its ability to promote health, specifically cellular function. (I know Diane Ionson has been giving Frankincense to Bert a lot lately).

¹ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/2141/epiphany-of-the-lord>

But that is not all. Are your hands experiencing dryness from the winter air? Do you want to improve the look of your scaly hands? Frankincense can help! Feeling stressed? It just so happens that Frankincense essential oil has a solution for that. The chemical components of Frankincense result in an extremely powerful aroma that can help to dispel negative feelings—like stress.² (I got so excited researching this while writing my sermon that I had to go get the bottle and put some in my diffuser).

And then there was Myrrh. “Ancient records show that Myrrh was deemed so valuable that at times it was valued at its weight in gold. Myrrh essential oil is derived from the gummy resin of the small, thorny Myrrh tree. Referenced in the Bible as the Balm of Gilead, Myrrh has been used throughout history as a perfume and incense. It was also employed in embalming and religious ceremonies. Myrrh has powerful cleansing properties, especially for the mouth and throat. It is also soothing to the skin—promoting a smooth, youthful-looking complexion—and promotes emotional balance and well-being when used aromatically.

Myrrh can be used to help relieve colds and coughs. It is used in Aromatherapy to relieve minor skin irritations or eczema and dermatitis, it has powerful cleansing properties for the mouth and throat, use to promote youth-full looking completions

Add to your lotion/moisturizer to help reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles. And Diffuse to help promote awareness. - I know sign me up!

Emotionally Myrrh is known as The Oil of Mother Earth.

Myrrh oil nurtures the soul’s relationship with its maternal mother and with the earth. When the mother-child bond has been disrupted, the soul may lose its childlike ability to trust. Feelings of trust are replaced with feelings of fear and a belief that the world is unsafe. Myrrh assists the individuals in letting go of fear. Through reestablishing a healthy connection to the earth and to one’s own mother, Myrrh rekindles trust within the soul. As the individual learns to once again live in trust, confidence in the goodness of life returns and the soul feels more safe and at home on the earth. Myrrh offers Positive Properties like Feeling safe in the world, healthy attachments, trusting the goodness of life, bonded, maternal connection, nurtured and loved.

Suddenly these gifts make a whole lot more sense to me and I hope some other theologians begin to discover the depths of these gifts brought to Jesus. Gifts fit for a king not just because of their monetary worth but because they are thought to have life-giving, healing, holistic properties that assist in well-being, fullness of life, awareness, trust, bring connection with the earth and one another. I imagine Jesus used some of these gifts in his spiritual journey and healing practices. It just makes sense. These gifts are also symbols of what Jesus desires for each of us. Wholeness, healing, trust, awareness, well-being.

In seeing the star our story tells us their were too reactions. Herod became very afraid and the magi were transformed. Both reactions were appropriate. If the constellations were changing at the birth of this child what do we have control of anymore? When we hear that Herod was

² <https://www.doterra.com/US/en/blog/spotlight-frankincense-oil>

frightened, "and all Jerusalem with him," it makes sense. Because when the heavens themselves begin to defy prediction, there is no telling what might happen. Who knows, what other constellations might collapse--constellations of power, constellations of privilege, constellations of the possible and the impossible, of what we can imagine and what we've come to expect? "If all that collapses, where will that leave us? Who among us can say for sure that it will be better? If everything changes, how will we know what to do? We Christians talk a good game about praying and working for the new but I hear those fears voiced almost every meeting we have. "For behold," it says in scripture, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth...." "Behold, I am doing a new thing...." "Therefore, if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2 Co 5:17)

So much of our God-talk points to the renovating power of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. But is that really what we're seeking?

Sometimes when we speak of the new, I think what we mostly mean is something more along the lines, not of "new," but more like "improved." The fact is, much of the time, even faithful people can't imagine a world that is much different from the one that we already have.

And that's the point: of course we can't. But God can. And God is longing to show us that vision, which is a vision for all Creation, and all time.

As we begin another year there is something so lovely, even holy, about naming our hopes for our lives, even when they are small hopes.

I don't know about you, but I've seen people quit smoking on the strength of a New Year's resolution. I've seen someone go from sitting on their couch to running a half-marathon on the strength of a New Year's resolution. I've seen someone finish a long-abandoned degree on the strength of a New Year's resolution.

These are all brave and holy acts, in their way. But, fundamentally, what makes them holy is that each one is not an end in itself, but rather, a new beginning.

These steps toward a different future may be small, they may be incremental, but they are not paltry or they are not shallow, because they are the first steps toward the new--the first steps toward a future that the dreamer can't quite see, but which the dreamer faithfully pursues, just the same.

Let's also not forget that they require tremendous trust--trust that the strength to see them through is there to be found, trust that it will get easier, trust that setbacks aren't the end if we don't let them be.

Learning that kind of trust can mean nothing short of learning to see the world and ourselves in a whole new way. Sometimes, it's nothing short of learning to live in the light of a new star."³

"When Herod saw that star, all he could manage to see was bad news. But the point is that it's good news. So, as a new year begins, as we move from a season of taking stock and move into a season of taking action, we are invited--you and I--to push beyond all the old rules and all the expectations of what can and can't be, what should and should not be.

³ emitted from http://day1.org/6318-the_troubling_star

We're invited to acknowledge our fears; and indeed, it's important that we do--but we're invited even more urgently to push past them and to imagine what it might mean to live in the light of that new star.

For the brokenhearted and the broken down and the plain, old flat broke--for all the ways that brokenness in all its forms can shrink our world until it has no room for anything but pain and worry--the light of that new star reveals a path, a path back to the world.

For the victims of injustice and oppression, the victims of those subtle and the not-so-subtle exclusions that some know all too well and others seem as if they cannot see at all, the light of that new star is a reminder, as the old song says, that change is gonna come.

For those who are afraid to attempt new things--too afraid of who might see, too afraid of who might laugh, too afraid of the smirk and the diminishing comment or the raised eyebrow, the light of that star reveals a gallery of other faces, eager to cheer, eager to help, and eager to undertake the journey, too.

Whatever our fears may be, Epiphany reminds us that we can live our lives in a new light.

Epiphany reminds us that Jesus, the light of the world, has arrived in all his rule-breaking, table-turning glory, helping us to see all things, and even ourselves, in new ways.

"Take heart," Jesus says, "It is I; have no fear."

May you and I always seek to live in the light of his promise.

Amen."⁴

⁴ http://day1.org/6318-the_troubling_star