

## WORSHIP FOR JAN 3, 2021

Epiphany Sunday

### WELCOME/ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### OPENING PRAYER

On this Epiphany Sunday, let's listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, (*light candle*)

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.

Guiding God, your light beams into our lives, offering us what we cannot do without: hope. Help us hear your hope and draw nearer to you and your truth as we encounter your word together today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

#### READING: Matthew 2:7-22 (Jonathon Gorniak)

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.

#### REFLECTION

The passage from Matthew we just heard comes immediately following the account of Jesus' birth... which isn't really much of an account at all. Matthew doesn't tell the story we hear every year on Christmas eve.

In Matthew there are no shepherds, no angel choirs at Jesus' birth, in fact, the actual birth itself is not the focus event – the only thing to distinguish it from any other birth is the appearance of a new star in the sky.... something noticed only by those in a distant land who study the stars

If you want to read the pageant version of the Christmas story, you'll need to go to the gospel of Luke

In Matthew's version of the birth story.... there are two things that stand out: First, Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth with naming Jesus' ancestral lineage, traced through the line of Joseph, all the way back to Abraham. We almost never read this part of the story.... but it is a very interesting list of names which are actually quite important for establishing Matthew's key point....

There are some great branches on Jesus' family tree –  
Abraham, who showed true faithfulness to God;  
Josiah, who became king of Israel when he was only 8 years old, but ruled wisely and fairly;  
David, the greatest king Israel ever had, despite some rather unfortunate incidents;  
Zerubbabel, who led the first wave of Israelites out of exile in Babylon and back to the land of Judah and who began construction on the second Temple;  
and of course Joseph, the patient, understanding husband of Mary, who stood by her through thick and thin.

But what really stands out about Jesus' family tree are the number of rascals and scoundrels we find there –  
there's Jacob, who cheated his twin brother out of his birthright;  
and Judah, who conspired with his brothers to sell their other brother Joseph into slavery;  
there's Rehoboam, David's grandson, who ruled Israel with both cruelty and incompetence;  
and Joram, who when he became king had all his brothers slaughtered, of whom it was said: "he passed away, to no one's regret";  
there's Ahaz who was an idolator,  
and Manasseh, who "did evil in the eyes of the Lord."

There is also, quite surprisingly, mention of five women.... although Jewish lineage was always traced through the male line, Matthew breaks with tradition and includes these women – all of them strong, determined women of action.... all of them women with a tarnished reputation – a schemer, a prostitute, a foreigner, an adulterer, and an unwed mother....

Matthew could have chosen to keep Jesus' rather shady ancestry in the dark... at the very least, he could have avoided mention of these women of ill-repute who pepper his lineage.... but Matthew is making an important point by sharing this list of names.... all these names – the good, the bad and the ugly – represent the complicated reality into which God chooses to be born

the truth of our lives is never much prettier than the truth of Jesus' family tree... we are all a jumbled up mix of good, bad and ugly... scratch the surface of your life, or my life, or anyone else's life and you find beauty, corruption and tragedy

What Matthew is telling us is that God enters into the mess and ambiguity of our lives – takes us exactly as we are, takes the world exactly as it is, and says – I can work with this.... I will become a part of this and bring wholeness and new life through this – not by side-stepping what's broken, but by taking what is broken and transforming it... the messy, complex reality of our lives is the clay God uses to shape salvation.

The second key feature of Matthew's account of the nativity story is the extent to which God's plan for salvation is dependent on human cooperation... If Joseph had followed the convention of his day and preserved his own reputation by having Mary stoned for adultery when he discovered she was pregnant, that would have been the end of the story

Similarly, if the wise men had done the prudent thing, chosen the only legal option available to them, they would have returned to Herod as he had commanded them and reported on the baby's whereabouts, after which Herod would have promptly dispatched agents to execute the child and the story would have been over before it even got properly started... God incarnate would not have made it to his third birthday

Again, if Joseph had not listened to the angel, and taken his family to Egypt where they were forced to live as outsiders and refugees, Jesus would have been among the thousands of other infants slaughtered that year by Herod in his obsessive grasping at power

Matthew wants us to see that God's plan for salvation relies on the active and faithful participation of folks who initially appear peripheral to the story – Joseph and the wise men only become part of the story because of the

choices they make... yet their involvement is critical and they are not only called upon to act, but to act with great courage... to refuse to do what is expected, what is demanded by those in power, what is safe and appropriate, in order to do what is right.... they place themselves at great risk – risking their reputations and even their lives.... and they do all this not because they have any kind of guarantee that things will turn out OK for them – in fact, all evidence would point to the contrary.... all they have is a promise – a word of hope from God.... and they bet everything on that

Matthew wants us to see that God's salvation comes not as rescue from life's trials, but as accompaniment through them, as invitation and motivation to draw out our best selves in the midst of the worst that life can throw at us, as hope that sustains us through the darkest night

He highlights these parts of the story because he is writing to Jewish Christians in the first century who are facing uncertain times... things are pretty bad – the Romans are cracking down on the Jews, the Jews are cracking down on the followers of Jesus, the kingdom of God that Jesus prophesied about seems further away than ever before... the Christians are beginning to wonder whether their faith in Jesus is all for naught... they are beginning to lose hope...

So Matthew reminds them how God works.... that God enters the corruption and chaos of our world and our lives and births miracles.... that only those paying attention even notice... that the greatest example of God's miraculous intervention in human affairs began as a non-event, and didn't go smoothly... Matthew reminds them that they play an important role in God's plan.... in fact, the less important and central they feel in God's story, the more important their role may be...

don't lose hope.... God is at work in the midst of this mess.... and God needs your help.... now is not the time for giving up – now is the time for bold action, for risk and sacrifice and courage... now is the time to seize God's promises and let that be the light that guides you

He was writing nearly 2000 years ago, but Matthew could have penned this story today and its reminder would have been just as relevant we too live in the shadow of many Herods... we too wonder sometimes if our faith in a God of justice and peace isn't misplaced... we too know the bitter taste of despair and helplessness...

the problems of our world, heck - the problems of our own lives, often feel too big to tackle, too entrenched to change  
we long for a miracle solution – the proverbial silver bullet – when all the while the miracle is unfolding around us, quietly waiting for us to notice and join in

we too can be wise ones, learning to spot the signs and follow where they lead...

look for any place where a ray of hope shines in the surrounding darkness

look for ordinary people acting with extraordinary courage and faith

look for those who defy the logic of power and might and choose instead the path of compassion and vulnerability

look for any place, and every place where life persists in spite of all efforts to extinguish it

The Christmas miracle is the story of hope born into the midst of great human tragedy... a hope which inspires greatness in the most ordinary people, which calls forth courage in the face of impossible odds, which compels people to risk and to act despite overwhelming circumstances... it is a miracle which is still unfolding today, and we are invited to be a part of it

and we are part of it, every time we choose compassion over self-interest...

whenever we find the courage to speak out against injustice...

when we share our time, our energy, and our resources in a hundred different ways to make the world a better place for everyone

but sometimes we can't see how anything we do will make any real difference... then it's hard to find the motivation to try

I sometimes feel this way when I ponder certain questions I struggle with in my life.... i often feel this way when i listen to the news.... there are just some things that it feels like i have no power to change... but a little baby born in Bethlehem begs to differ

it is in this hope – which refuses to believe in impossibilities – that the United Church has undertaken the Unsettling Goods campaign...

it is into this hope which we are invited to enter – through prayer, deep listening, and action...

we join our hope to the hopes of many Palestinians and Israelis who long for a just peace in their land...

We are guided by the wisdom of Christians in the Holy Land who have said: Hope is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble, and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit who is dwelling in us. From this vision derives the strength to be steadfast, remain firm and work to change the reality in which we find ourselves. Hope means not giving in to evil but rather standing up to it and continuing to resist it.

I am reminded of a poem by one of my favourite poets, Ann Weems, who writes:

In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,  
there is a deafening alleluia  
rising from the souls of those who weep,  
and of those who weep with those who weep.  
If you watch, you will see  
the hand of God  
putting the stars back in their skies  
one by one.

The story of Christmas is the story of God's light breaking into the darkness of human suffering and injustice and insisting that there is another way... it comes to us not as a blaze of blinding light which dispels all shadows – but as a single, fragile candle burning in the night, defying the power of the darkness to be absolute... a light which could so easily be snuffed out if some do not commit to protect it... a light which grows only as others light their own candles from it and shine their light into the darkness around them

May our lives be lit by the light of Christ, and may we shine brightly in the darkness, knowing ours is a light the darkness can not put out.

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Let's gather ourselves together as a community in prayer...

During this responsive prayer when you hear me say O God, I invite you to respond with the words "you are with us in darkness & in light".

Let's pray... In the darkness of time, you created all that lives & breathes. In the darkness of Mary's womb, you nurtured the Christ-child, bringer of light. In the darkness of our world, O God, your spirit sustains us.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

Under the cover of darkness, Magi followed the star to the Christ-child.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

In blessed desert darkness, Mary & Joseph fled to safety in Egypt with the infant Jesus.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

In quiet darkness, dreams emerge, guiding the Holy family home to Galilee.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

In the stillness of the dark, we pray for all who need God's presence in a special way -

all who are sick, unemployed, bereaved, persecuted or homeless;

all who are demoralized and discouraged, all whose fear has turned to cynicism, all whose vulnerability has become bitterness.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

In the embrace of darkness, we pray for those who are near to our hearts – colleagues, partners, parents, children, neighbours, friends. We thank you God for their presence, and ask you to bless and protect them in all that they do – at home, at school, as they travel, as they work, as they play.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

In the serenity of darkness, we bring to you, O God, our fears and concerns, our hopes and our visions. In your presence, we come face to face with ourselves, and with the road that lies ahead of us. In the solitude of darkness we find expectant hope for the journey.

**O God, you are with us in darkness & in light.**

We continue to pray together now the prayer that Jesus taught...

**SUNG BLESSING:**

**COMMISSIONING & BENEDICTION**

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

And the Blessing of God, who Creates, Redeems and Sanctifies, be upon you

and all you love this day, and forever more. Amen.