

When We Get Home

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

January 3, 2021

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*Isaiah 60:1-6*

*60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*

*60:2 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.*

*60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*60:4 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.*

*60:5 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.*

*60:6 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.*

*Matthew 2:1-12*

*2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,*

*2:2 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."*

*2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;*

*2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.*

*2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*2:6 '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.'"*

*2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.*

*2:8 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."*

*2:9 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.*

*2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.*

*2:11 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.*

*2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

Prayer

Sermon

*Arise, your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*

*Wise men came from the east, following the star, until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

*Their journey reached its midpoint in Bethlehem.*

First, they made it to the manger,  
They met Jesus and Mary and Joseph,  
Gave them gold, frankincense and myrrh -  
No small or irrelevant gifts -  
Gold which bought the child safe passage to Egypt,

Frankincense which was used to treat coughs and respiratory ailments,  
Myrrh which was anti-bacterial,

They rested there a while,  
But this was the midpoint of their journey, not its end.  
Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,  
They went home a different way.

And the second half of their journey began.

We don't know much about the magi after Bethlehem.

But we can imagine that they learned some important things at the midpoint of their long journey.

They learned in Bethlehem to protect the most vulnerable.

It turns out that long before meeting Herod or bowing before the Christ Child, they were resisters of the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> But here in Bethlehem, in the presence of a tiny child, they learned to protect the vulnerable, so they defied Herod's murderous ways and helped at least this one child to escape.

I imagine they discovered within themselves a crisis competence - some of you may have seen that phrase in the New York Times this week.<sup>2</sup> An epiphany came. They were called to service, for just such a time as this.

Perhaps they had what Brian Doyle termed grace under duress. He wrote: "Maybe if we celebrate grace under duress rather than the illusion of total victory we will be less surprised and more prepared when illness and evil lurch into our lives, as they always will."<sup>3</sup>

In any case, their journey continued long after they left Bethlehem. Replacing the gifts they gave of Gold, frankincense and myrrh, for the return journey they packed hopefulness and strength received from this holy family; courage and resilience took up space in their saddle bags, and the wise men were far more wise, as they journeyed home by another way.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/epiphany-after-hard-year?s=03>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/01/nyregion/85-and-up-oldest-old-ruth-willig.html>

<sup>3</sup> Brian Doyle, quoted in <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/epiphany-after-hard-year?s=03>

I don't suppose the magi knew how long the first portion of their journey would be.

And perhaps as we catch up with them under the Bethlehem star, we are discovering the midpoint of a certain journey ourselves.

It's a new year, and Epiphany Sunday, a day we often reflect and set new goals for the year. It's an arbitrary thing, this turning of the calendar, and we often make unrealistic resolutions. We picked a theme word for 2020 back before we knew what Creativity would mean in a pandemic year and I dare not offer a theme word for this year. But the beginning of 2021 is a worthwhile marker. In March none of us could have known that we were in for a CoVid journey of such longevity, but now it seems we might, might, might be past the halfway mark? Could it be true, as we follow the light of dawning vaccines? But we, like the magi, have a long road to go.

In this Epiphany season the questions on my mind are: what we have learned so far on this journey, and what our call is for the remainder?

As a church I think we have discovered our own version of crisis competence, and indeed creativity has played a huge role. I could never say often enough how amazingly adaptive and creative I think our lay leadership and staff have been. And, like the Magi, we have practiced generosity, giving gifts to our neighbors remembering that Jesus taught, when we give to our neighbors we are giving to him. We have visited bearing gifts - less often in person but more often than ever in phone calls, cards, emails, care packages.

And now, perhaps the harder part, discerning God's call to us as individuals and as a church through the second half of the journey. We are tired, we are lonely, we are so over pandemic living. And yet I believe this is the season when God's call to us is all the more important. Like the Magi, we need to protect the most vulnerable. Like the Magi, we've got to pack our metaphorical camel bags for the rest of the journey. The star is going to set and in the post-Christmas let down it's going to be more important to be church to one another, to be kind to friends and neighbors, to practice resilience.

As we journey through, how are we building our own resilience and how are we supporting resilience in our children, our elders, families in need?

We have in the last year had epiphanies around economic inequality as we've watched the pandemic affect certain communities very differently. We've had epiphanies around

voting rights and the importance of fair elections and peaceful transitions of power. We've had epiphanies around racial justice. But these epiphanies have to be met with action - how do we live into the call of these lessons?

There's one more question I'd like us to ponder:

What are the lessons we will take from CoVid time into whatever comes next?

How is God calling us to act now, and what will we learn to shape our actions to come?

What are the gifts we will receive from this time of challenge, that will help us be more resilient next year?

If we can practice kindness in a pandemic, we can do so afterward, too.

If we can practice generosity

If we can practice patience

If we can practice adaptability

If we can be creative

If we can be courageous

in a pandemic, we can do so afterward, too.

My preaching theme for this season after Epiphany is Listening for God's Call.

What is God calling us to do and be,

In this phase of the CoVid journey?

And when we have made it home by another way,

What will God's calling be for us then?

Amen.