

Sermon: *“After the Star”*\*

*Isaiah 43: 1–7; Matthew 2: 1–12*

*St. James Presbyterian Church, January 9, 2022*

*The Rev. Dr. Kay S. Diviney*

My first real experience of night came many years ago, on one of my first visits to Prince Edward Island, long before I moved here. My husband and I were staying on his family’s farm in Rice Point, which in those days was still truly countryside, much quieter, less populated, and darker than it is today. In the early evening, we had walked about half a mile up the road to visit some neighbours. It was still only dusk when we arrived, but by the time we left, night had well and truly fallen. And what a black night it was! There were no houselights or car lights marking out the distance; there was no hint of a fading sun on the western horizon, no moon, no stars. We could see nothing — not the ground before our feet, nor the lane we were supposed to be walking on, not the road we were heading toward, nor fields nor trees, nor any foraging skunks that might have lumbered into our path. It seemed as if the whole world had been swallowed up, or as if, without noticing it, we had fallen silently into a deep well. I still remember how uncanny, how unnerving it was — and how difficult it was to make that move, to step out into all of that blackness.

Perhaps the darkness that the Wise Men travelled through was like that: almost complete. Perhaps the palm trees and the flat-roofed houses were *not* silhouetted crisply against a luminous sky, as the Christmas cards often have it, and the star was *not* as bright as a comet or a small sun. Perhaps instead the hills and plains through which these travellers passed as they followed the star were next to invisible to them. Perhaps the star shone so faintly in the vast murky sky that only their own well-trained and attentive eyes could pick it out at all. It may be that the Wise Men too

---

\* This sermon text is provided as a help to listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

found it difficult to put one foot in front of the other in the darkness as they journeyed after the star.

“A cold coming we had of it,” the poet T.S. Eliot imagined them saying: “Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey: / The ways deep and the weather sharp, / The very dead of winter.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the Magi too had to fight that creeping feeling of fear as they stepped out into the void, not knowing where they were going, with only that one thin point of light to draw them onward — one tiny, bright chip of hope.

Matthew’s story of the journey of the Wise Men — the Magi — begins and ends with darkness, for it begins and ends with Herod. It is “in the time of King Herod” that the travellers arrive in Jerusalem, and he broods over the story until the end, waiting for them to return, waiting for news of Jesus, and not, as he claims, so that he can “pay him homage.” The news that the “king of the Jews” has just been born cannot be good news to the man who already *is* the king of the Jews. Herod’s agitation represents the resistance of this world to the liberating movement of God, and it is distressing to see such power as Herod’s already gathering at the moment that Mary lays him in the manger. It is distressing to have to admit that the time itself is defined by Herod; it is *his* time. He is the crafty politician who knows how the game of the world is played. He has the authority to summon priests and scribes, and the smarts to manipulate even the Wise Men, the perversity to turn good purposes to bad, and the ruthless power to send troops to Bethlehem to slaughter the innocents. The world in which the Wise Men travel, the world into which Jesus is born, is Herod’s world.

Yet if the story that Matthew tells is shot through with darkness, it is also shot through with light. It is the *time* of King Herod, but it is *after* Jesus

---

<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi,” 1927. Eliot is quoting the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Anglican bishop Lancelot Andewes in the opening lines.

has already been born. Herod summons to him the chief priests and scribes, his creatures, seeking through them to work evil for Jesus, but the prophecy they utter is one of promise. That promise — of a ruler unlike Herod who will lead and protect his people like a good shepherd — is at that very moment being confirmed by a star and a birth. It may be that Herod manipulates the Wise Men, but the star leads them onward to witness that birth. It may be that Herod calls them back to Jerusalem hoping then to turn their good purposes to evil, but God, who turns evil purposes to good, sends them a dream to warn them to take another road.

In other words, it is a world of darkness, but in it there is a also star. The world may be marked by Herod, manipulating the time, controlling events; Herod may indeed be the framework of the story. But at its centre, its very centre, is a moment, a movement, a grace, that Herod is powerless to obstruct or control. The Wise Men arrive; they see the child, with Mary his mother; and they kneel before him, offering him their gifts. Such a simple thing. And yet it changes everything. After the star, after the encounter with the infant Jesus, the Wise Men themselves can no longer travel on their former pathways, but must now "take another road." As for the world: it too will be, has been transformed through the truth, the grace, the compassion, and the sacrifice of Jesus, the child who was born among us.

What is darkness for us? What is light? Overnight on Friday, during our wild storm, quite a few of us, myself included, were plunged into a chilly darkness that reminded us how nice warmth and light really are. But we don't really need a power outage to tell us about the darkness of the world. We see it on the evening news, and we feel it in our own lives too. Truth to tell, even the journey that we undertake *after* the star, after God's light enters into our lives, can be difficult. For the Magi in Eliot's poem, the birth that the wise men come to see so upends their world that they are no longer at home, even when they *are* at home. "We returned to our

places," Eliot's Wise Man says, "these Kingdoms / But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation."

We too are journeying, stepping out day by day into unknown lands. We too have seen a star. And, having seen that star, however dimly, however intermittently, we too find ourselves transformed. After the star, there indeed be confusion and sorrow, as we let go of the old things that once claimed us. But we nevertheless welcome this new light, this new hope, this hope that changes our lives, this hope that is not to be missed.

Today, we look back on Epiphany, as well as on that long sweep of Sundays that began with Advent and has carried us to this very day, a day in which we live "after the star," as indeed we live all of our days. We have heard how the people of Israel waited in darkness, but into this darkness came light, and "the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1). As we contemplate the marvellous and mysterious ways in which God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, we celebrate not only the coming of Jesus into our world as the true light who reveals God, but also the star, that tiny chip of light that reveals Jesus—Messiah, Lord, and helpless child—to the Wise Men, those Gentile seekers, who sought him, and through them to us.

After the star, did not the Wise Men carry back into their lives an inner illumination, a tiny chip of starlight that they could bring with them to their own lands? And is it not the same for us? All human beings, we are told, are made of "star-stuff"—the dust of stars trickling through the universe. Those who have received the light of the Gospel, whether a faint glimmer, as of a far-off star, or a steady beam, as if a near and present sun, are changed and transformed by it, and given the power to share that light with others. One light kindles another light, and that light kindles another, on and on, lights shining together in the darkness.

Let us rejoice and give thanks for the light we have been given, and offer ourselves as light to others.

To God be all glory and honour. Amen.