

# Sermon

## “A Star Trek”

A Sermon for First Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 5, 2020

Epiphany

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

*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.*

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

*Is. 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.*

*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.*

*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.*

*Matt. 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 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.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he*

*inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
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.'"*

*Matt. 2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

- I. Those who studied Isaiah with me last year will recall**
  - A. Chapters 1-39 are nearly all bad news**
  - B. Chapters 40-55 - "Comfort ye!"**
  - C. By the time we get to Isaiah 60 the poetry is envisioning a newly ascendant Jerusalem — a future in which God's people live obediently, and in which they are richly blessed.**

**"Arise and let God's glory reflect off you!"**
  - D. Not just theological — there is a geo-political and economic component to this new Jerusalem.**
    - 1. Nations will come to your light**
    - 2. Kings visit to see how you are doing this**

3. ***A multitude of camels* shall bring Gold and frankincense!**
  4. **by verse 11 ... “Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession.”**
    - † **So many trucks to unload you have to work on three-shifts at the gates.**
- E. It is a powerful vision of God’s work to redeem God’s people.**

## **II. Matthew’s riff on “New Jerusalem”**

- A. When the gospel according to Matthew begins telling about the redemption accomplished through the Christ-child, we have the story of three wise men who come bearing ... you guessed it!**
  - 1. Gold and Frankincense!**
- B. Matthew knows the old poetry of Isaiah — but suggests that because there is a *new king* in Bethlehem - that the camels and their gifts are diverted to there.**
- C. For all of the awful things that might be said of Herod (and there are plenty of those) — he is not stupid . . .**
  - 1. He sees wise men heading to Bethlehem and not Jerusalem and he adds it up to be what it is — regime-change.**
  - 2. The murderous rage which Herod enacts before the end of chapter 2 in Matthew is a predictable result of the threat that he will be**

**usurped.**

**III. But today we are celebrating Epiphany**

- A. Epiphany is a celebration that God came into the world and the assurance that we can, in fact, discover the evidence of God’s presence if we are attentive.**
- B. The three wise ones from the East noticed a brightly shining star and began tracking it.**
- C. Indeed, they began “following it.”**
- D. We are given almost no information about how they came to see the star as a sign of the arrival of a messiah for the Jews.**
- E. And “following” a star is not exactly a precise science.**
  - 1. It is “moving” across the sky as the earth turns.**
  - 2. There is a parallactic shift in its position as the earth moves through it’s own orbit...**
- F. They set out on this journey to find the child without knowing many of the things you might want to know:**
  - 1. How far will we have to go?**
  - 2. What happens if the star dims or we lose it among the other stars?**
  - 3. Why should *we* wise men of the East who have no loyalty or obvious connection to the Jews in Palestine be sent on such a journey with such gifts as these?**

- IV. These wise ones are pilgrims-really**
- A. People who set out on a wild adventure with God and who do that:**
    - 1. Before all the questions are answered — trusting that God will give answers as needed along the way.**
  - B. People who find a way to live in hope which to many others just looks like foolishness...**
    - 1. I can imagine their neighbors:  
“Look at these fools setting out following a star to destinations unknown and to pay homage to someone who isn’t even their king!”**
    - 2. Living hopefully is to live at peace with the limits of what can be seen and understood — and yet still with confidence that God is and will continue to do good things for you.**
  - C. People who are able to be generous with strangers.**
    - 1. Who arrives at a stranger’s house and leaves gifts of gold?**
    - 2. — those who know that gold isn’t everything.**
- V. Many Christians are wondering about what the church of the 21st century will become?**
- A. It seems abundantly clear that, at least in North America, it will become a smaller church in terms of numbers . . .**
  - B. It also seems clear that our many theological arguments have not served the cause of unity in Christ — as evidenced by the proposal in the UMC this past week to split along theological lines.**

† **And the number of PCUSA congregations  
which have departed to other denominations.**

*Rom. 14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the  
purpose of quarreling over opinions.*

- C. To be a Christian right now is more than a little bit  
bewildering . . .**
- 1. We are asked to follow Christ . . . but that path  
is as elusive as knowing precisely how to follow  
a star.**
  - 2. We want to live in hope that God knows what  
God is doing and these titanic shifts in the  
church are not arbitrary . . . but the definition  
of hope is to trust in things not yet seen and it  
is too early to know exactly where the church  
is heading.**
  - 3. We know that God has invited us to be as  
generous with others as God has been with us .  
. . . but like the wise men's neighbors we  
sometime wonder why our gifts should be  
deployed in service to people "like that."**

**VI. Today's message is not a list of answers to the questions**

**A. But it *is* to do what God's people have always  
done:**

- 1. To gather again in fellowship**
- 2. Re-tell our story and wonder how the story  
informs our common life today and in the days  
ahead.**

**B. Today our story is also informed by the sacrament  
of the Lord's Supper**

- 1. A means of grace given without merit**
- 2. A tangible reminder of the ways that God opens up God's hands and satisfies the needs of every living thing.**
- 3. We come to the Table expecting to receive gifts beyond our own making and in faith that God blesses us in this sacrament.**

**C. So come!**

- 1. Come even if you (like the magi) are unsure where this journey of faith is taking you.**
- 2. Come even if you (like the magi) wonder why your gifts are needed.**
- 3. Come — and like the magi — pay homage to the one who comes to save!**

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