

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 5, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

A TROUBLING STAR EPIPHANY

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're leaving the stockings off the mantle this year, but you almost certainly have a **star**.

Quite often, it's at the very top of the tree--that **star**--the highest point in the living room.

The Rev. Maxwell Grant

I remember the year when I was a kid, taking part in my Confirmation class, and I noticed for the first time that the starlight pictured on most of our Christmas cards was **in the shape of the cross**

--a quiet reminder of what is to come—
the silent night at what seems to be the end of the story.

That was my first encounter with the possibility that, if you think about it, **there can be something ominous about the Christmas star**.

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So, it's interesting to note that Matthew's gospel seems to agree.

In a passage that some churches will read today, and others will read on January 6th, **Epiphany** proper, Matthew describes the encounter between the wise men and King Herod. This is what Matthew says:

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.'

Then Matthew continues with these words:

"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."

I can't help but wonder if King Herod, who, of course, gets so much so very wrong, actually gets at least part of this news right.

Because, at least, he understands that this rising star is big news.

And he also recognizes that it is not good news for him.

But as Matthew notes, Herod isn't the only one who looks at that **star** and sees something ominous hanging there.

All Jerusalem agrees with him.

That star is bad news.

We forget that, for most of human history, most people would have agreed.

The ancient historian Josephus noted that a **star** stood over the city of Jerusalem just before its fall in 70 AD.

And there were many who thought that the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD had been caused by a comet.

Likewise, the appearance of a **star** in the sky over England in 1066, just before the Battle of Hastings, was seen as a dark omen of what was to come.

And in 1835, some people apparently even blamed a **star** for the fall of the Alamo.

So, when we hear that Herod was frightened, "*and all Jerusalem with him*," it makes sense.

Because, hey, 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?

That goes for Christians, too.

We Christians have always **talked** a good game about praying and working for the new.

"For behold," it says in scripture, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth...."

"Behold, I am doing a new thing...."

"And he that sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'" (**Revelation 21:5**)

"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 you and I mostly mean is something more along the lines, not of "new," but more like "*improved*."

So often, it seems as if we pray only for a vaguely optimized version of what we already have here.

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.**

Of course, you and I can't. We can't.

But God can.

God is longing to show us that vision, which is a vision for us, and for those we love, and for all people, and all Creation, and all time.

God is longing to make us part of something that goes far beyond our shallow declarations about our hope in the new.

It seems important to name that as we begin another year, and we are thick in the season of New Year's resolutions.

There is something so lovely, even holy, about naming our hopes for our lives, even when they are small hopes.

- people quit smoking on the strength of a New Year's resolution.
- go from sitting on their couch to running a half-marathon on the strength of a New Year's resolution.
- someone finishes 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 nor are they 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 of all our good intentions if we don't let them be.

Learning that kind of trust can mean nothing short of learning to see the world in a whole new way--and to see ourselves in a whole new way.

Sometimes, it's nothing short of learning to live in the light of a new star.

In a very different context, the business writer Rosabeth Moss Kanter has written,
"Success and failure are not events. They are trajectories."

That's true of resolutions, too.

More deeply, it's true of God's engagement with us, and with all Creation.

It's not just an **event**; it is a **trajectory**.

And that's what Herod and Jerusalem began to see as they looked out in the night sky and saw a new star blazing just above them.

That star was on a trajectory so broad that it was on none of their maps.

And it showed them, to their horror, that God's vision for Creation is on a trajectory so broad that

- what we think we know and what we think we understand about how things work is just the beginning of what's out there.

There is so much more in store for us. And thank God there is.

When Herod saw that star, all he could manage to see was bad news.

But the point is that it's **good news**.

Truth be told, it's the **greatest news there is**.

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.

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

- 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 barriers 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.

It is the greatest news that ever was, is, or shall be.

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

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

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.... Amen.