Epiphany[i] Reflection for 10 January 2021
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
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Wednesday was the Christian church's Feast of the Epiphany, which traditionally would have been celebrated with its own special service. Since we in The United Church of Canada do not do that, I am choosing to fall a week behind in the Revised Common lectionary readings to celebrate the Epiphany this week, as the start of our whole next liturgical season, which lasts right up to Lent.

I want to be clear that this sermon is not mine. I have edited it a bit here and there for our situation. However, it is the work of Anne Le Bas, clergy in the Church of England, with whose theology I have yet to find anything with which I don't agree. She posted it on the PRCL-L internet site for preachers for Epiphany 2017. In this week in which I as a dual U.S./Canadian have been glued to U.S. news, I share her adapted sermon with you.

Epiphany is an ancient feast, going back into the early centuries of the Church, and it was the main celebration of Christmas at first, as it still is in some parts of the world. It was especially popular once Christianity became the imperial faith of Rome and then the faith of kings and emperors across Europe in the Middle Ages. It's easy to see why, when you look at how the story has been presented in paint, mosaic and stone over the years.

In art, the Magi were pictured as exotic visitors from the East. Their feast was the ideal opportunity for a bit of bling, for fine fabrics, rich colours, shiny gold and silver and precious stones. They were much more appealing to royal courts than a bunch of drab-looking shepherds in homespun clothes.

Medieval kings were fond of staging re-enactments of the Epiphany story as part of their court celebrations, and you can guess who got to play the part of the Magi—**they did!** They weren't letting anyone else hog the limelight and the best costumes. The story of the Magi was used to legitimise their *own* power and wealth. If they had been welcome at the crib, so would any powerful, wealthy person. That's true, in a way, but they didn't necessarily consider whether it mattered how you came by your wealth and power, or what you did with it.

Medieval kings muscled into the picture, no matter how much they had to distort it in the process. That's why these Magi gradually became thought of as kings, despite the fact that Matthew doesn't call them that at all, or even hint that they might have been.

The only king in Matthew's story was the murderous king Herod, but no one who valued their lives was going to point that out to a Medieval monarch.

But if these visitors weren't kings, who were they? There's a lot of debate about that. In the ancient world, a Magus—that's the singular—could be any of a large range of people. Originally, they seem to have been priests of the Zoroastrian faith, from Persia, but by the time of Jesus, the word could be used for anyone who practiced what were seen as magical arts. BF: magic and Magi come from the same roots in various languages.[ii]

Some Magi observed the natural world—the stars and planets—looking for divine messages in them. Their observations gave birth to what we now call science. Others were philosophers or gurus, claiming some special secret knowledge which they would share with their *followers*. Some were no more than snake-oil salespeople, con artists, people looking to exert power and gain wealth by trickery.

These *particular* visitors to the infant Christ obviously had an interest in astronomy—they spotted the star—but we don't know much more about them than that. They may have been rich enough to afford costly gifts, but it might be that the gold, frankincense and myrrh they brought was all the wealth they had. I (Rev. Barb) even wonder whether they solicited the gifts from wealthy donors.

They certainly weren't the kings that later history turned them into, and they weren't even necessarily the "wise men" our modern translations tend to call them. After all, going straight to the reigning king to tell him that he had a rival in the shape of a vulnerable baby was hardly a sensible move.

So all we can really say is that these Magi were from far away, Gentiles not Jews, and that they were seekers. They were people who knew that there was more to know, people who knew that they needed something, and that they needed it enough to trek a long distance and give gifts of great value to find it. They didn't know where they were going, or what they were going to do when they got there, or what difference it would make, but they knew they had to make the journey.

I (Rev. Barb) have been contemplating all week how this season of Epiphany reflects what intentional interim ministry is about. We at EPUC are on a journey. We did not know the destination when we started, but in faith knew we had to make the journey. The destination, though still not completely in focus, fills us with hopeful anticipation.

The story of the magi is really a long way from the gilded, shiny tale those Medieval monarchs wanted it to be. It's a story of confusion and terror, a story with a bloodbath at its end, as King Herod tries to obliterate the competition for his throne. The Holy

Family become refugees in Egypt as a result. The whole thing is, in short, a bit of a mess. And yet it proclaims that in the midst of that mess, God is present.

For us at EPUC, the story of fear this past year is COVID-19, with our own flight from our building a mere few weeks after the season of Epiphany ended in 2020. We, too, have been aware throughout this time that God is with us, holding us together in the diaspora that worships together on Zoom and cares for each other in many ways, including frequent phone contact and running errands for those less able to do so.

God is present for people who don't know what they are doing or why they are doing it, for people who get it spectacularly wrong. *God* is present in the midst of bloodshed and grief, in the face of hatred and jealousy and bigotry. That is where I have struggled this week in light of the White Supremacist terror attack on the U.S. capitol and the U.S. system of government, on the Republic itself. I have **not** struggled with the sense of God's presence, but with what I feel toward the mob and the person who instigated their violence and could do even greater damage before 20 January.

A clergy colleague whom I admire and respect, Rev. Thom M. Shuman, whose name you often can find in acknowledgements in our bulletin for liturgy I have adapted, posted this on FaceBook yesterday:

> *I have found that the toughest thing Jesus asks me to do is to love my enemies. To care for those who take their beliefs and actions and scrape them along my soul like fingernails on an old-fashioned blackboard. To be willing to look beyond another's words to try to listen to their heart. To see the person who makes me so angry as a brother or sister made in God's image, just like me.*
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> *Jesus doesn't ask me to ignore their actions, or make excuses for them. Jesus doesn't tell me to let their angry words fill a conversation, without offering words of challenge, as well as hope. Jesus doesn't tell me to simply roll over and let them walk all over me or anyone else. Jesus challenges me to hold them accountable, but without judging them. Yeah, that's easy, isn't it?*
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> *But like a dog with a bone, Jesus will not let go of that call, that challenge, that command to love those I cannot stand, those who turn my stomach, those I want to punch in the face, those who I would not want to spend the rest of my life with.*
>
> *Because Jesus knows that it is love - not sappy, syrupy, sentimental love - but deep, gritty, tough as nails and soft as a baby's love that can transform hate, that can bring peace, that can knock evil off its pedestal, that can bring justice to the forgotten, that can change grudges into grace, and can put death out of business.*

I wish, just about everyday, that I had to struggle with Jesus over [other things he mentioned]. *But no, Jesus and I still go round and round every day over that bit about loving my enemies. (c) 2021 Thom M. Shuman (with permission to share)*

God is also present for those **we** may think don't fit in, who may feel like outsiders. That, my friends, is why EPUC Official Board decided at its November meeting to begin exploring what it would mean for us to become an Affirming Church. Jim McMaster is leading an "A-Team" (Affirm Team) of Gail Lorimer, Callie Archer, Joyce and Garth Smith, Morgan Perigo, and myself to do that. You will hear more in days ahead and if you have questions, feel free to contact one of us.

The bottom line is that *God* is present for those who live in "thick darkness" as the prophet Isaiah put it in our reading for tomorrow. *God* is present for people who are in a mess, people who have made a mess. And that, *my friends,* means that *God* is present for us, because somewhere in that messy list, we can all find ourselves, if not now, then at some point in our life. So this story is very good news, not just for kings and emperors, but for everyone, *including us.*

God longs for *us* to see the starlight that will lead *us* home, just as much as *God must have* longed for the Magi to see it and follow it, to know that they were welcome, that their lives had meaning and purpose.

Most of *us like to think of ourselves as good people,* but we're all capable of making a mess of life—our own and others. We can vandalise people's spirits by putting them down, smashing their confidence, disregarding or condemning them. That can cause *as much* damage that is far harder to put right *sometimes, than physical violence*. We promised together in our Covenanting Service on 20 December to be vigilant about such behaviour in our midst and we will.

We can all find ourselves stumbling about in the "thick darkness" Isaiah talked about, directionless, lost. Let's look to that star to call us home.

The Magi weren't really the shining heroes those Medieval kings wanted them to be. They were just people who were brave enough, or desperate enough, to make a *long and* costly journey to try to find *the child born in Bethlehem*. When they did, it wasn't in the political and economic heart of the nation—King Herod's palace.

They found the Child at the heart of an ordinary family who had an extraordinary willingness to welcome those God sent to them, whoever they were and wherever they'd come from, even if it threw their own lives into turmoil. That's exactly how the adult Jesus behaved—allowing his life to be messed up so that others could find the love of God.

The Magi go home, we are told “by another road.” That’s not just a geographical detail; it is a spiritual one too. They have been changed by the journey, and the welcome at the journey’s end. As will we be changed on this transitional journey, now including a journey to become more welcoming as an Affirming faith community, if we choose at the end of the educational process to claim that name for EPUC.

There’s an old Epiphany tradition in which priests bless small pieces of chalk. The chalk is then taken home and used to write a message above the doors of those who receive it. *This year, the* message *would* read 20 + C + M + B + 21. *The message looks quite cryptic. Can you guess what it means?* The 20 and the 21 are the year, of course. The C, M and B are either Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar—traditional names given to the Magi in Western Christianity—or alternatively they stand for “Christus Mansionem Benedicat” —Christ bless this house.

Either way, it is a sign to anyone who sees it that this is a house committed to giving a Christian welcome to those who are looking for it, wandering Magi, the questioning and confused, and to Christ himself, who comes to us in everyone we meet. If we were in our building, I would want to chalk those letters on the wooden lintels above the doors entering our sanctuary to remind us of that all year long.

Like those Medieval kings, we all like a bit of bling at times, but in the end, God’s love, known in the love we give and receive and in the welcome we extend to others, is far brighter and more glorious than earthly gold, far sweeter than frankincense, far better for healing than myrrh. May that light shine in our hearts today *and shine in our lives every day!*

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[i] Anne Le Bas, posted on PRCL-L for Epiphany 2017

[ii] magic | Origin and meaning of magic by Online Etymology Dictionary (etymonline.com) accessed on 9 January 2021,