

## Guiding Light – A Reflection based on Matthew 2: 1-12

January 10, 2021 by Debbie Stockdale

This morning I come to you with lots of pain on my heart for our world. It was a tough week. I saw a meme on Facebook that said: *I've tried the 7-day free trial for 2021 and I'd like to cancel my subscription.* That just about sums it up. With that in mind, we are going to do a little off roading this morning. The title of the message 'Guiding Light' stays the same but we are going to pay more attention to our world context and a little less on a more traditional Epiphany message.

The week began with the vacation scandal where we learned that many politicians travelled outside the country for sunny vacations for Christmas, insisting they didn't break any rules. It is very discouraging to find that so many in leadership decided to favour personal pleasure over the common good and that it was ok for them to interpret essential travel in such a way.

Then there was a comment by Erin O'Toole that struck despair into my heart when he said: *Not one criminal should be vaccinated ahead of any vulnerable Canadian or front-line health worker.* This misleading tweet reveals his lack of respect, understanding and compassion for the vulnerable and disenfranchised of our country and his willingness to twist the truth to seek political gain by playing us one against another in the very serious matter of public health.

The truth is that 600 inmates will be vaccinated because they are vulnerable Canadians due to their age and co-morbidities and the prisons where they live are super-spreader environments just like those who live in long-term care. O'Toole's ignoring of the whole truth and undermining of those who are providing public health leadership is unconscionable.

Then came the assault on the US capital by a group of extremists trying to stop the democratic process by storming into the Capitol building where the US Senate was meeting to officially accept the election results. It was horrifying to watch.

All this came on top of the Covid reality we are living with, where our hospitals are stretched to the limit and our restrictions have been renewed for another couple of weeks. What a mess!

As we gather this morning, as a Christian community and as individuals who follow Christ, I wonder what can we do to bring healing to ourselves, our community and to the world in the midst of all these realities?

I know that despair takes away energy and leaves us feeling helpless and alone. Where is hope and agency to be found? Where is the guiding light, that will lead us when the going gets rough?

Let's start with a prayer:

Christ, light of our world, open our hearts and our minds and our souls to your great love. Help us to hear your voice so that we can be your hands of love in our world. Help us feel the warmth of your light, giving us hope and bringing healing in the face of despair. Be with us we pray. Amen.

Where do we begin? Well, in addition to all these negative events that happened this week, Epiphany was celebrated on Wednesday. The season of Epiphany begins on January 6. We celebrate the visit of the magi, who followed a star to discover Jesus, not in a princely palace, but as a tiny vulnerable child in a very humble setting where the light of God's love shone through so brightly it brought these learned travellers to their knees. It is in this story where we will find some insight that may help us find our guiding light through these challenging times.

I found an article written by Walter Brueggemann, a favourite theologian of mine, about our scriptures for today that gave me a lens to work with. He says,

*The narrative of Epiphany is the story of these two human communities: Jerusalem, with its great pretensions, and Bethlehem, with its modest promises. We can choose a "return to normalcy" in a triumphalist mode, a life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions. We can receive life given in vulnerability. It is amazing—the true accent of epiphany—that the wise men do not resist this alternative but go on to the village. Rather than hesitate or resist, they reorganize their wealth and learning, and reorient themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials.*

*Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem.*

This was written in 2001 but rings so true for this moment in time. For each of us there is a choice. Do we choose Jerusalem or Bethlehem? Do we choose fear or hope? Do we choose Jesus or Herod? Let's hear Brueggemann again:

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*Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions. We can receive life given in vulnerability.*

Jerusalem is where Herod, the king of the Judeans, lived. He ruled with no regard for anything but his own comfort and power. As we learn later in the story, he was willing to kill all male babies to protect himself from possible challenges to his throne. By contrast, Bethlehem is the unpretentious little village where Jesus was born. The question is, which do we aspire to, where do we want to live?

For each of the individuals who stormed the capital building, there is a flawed culture and political structure, rife with seeds of destruction, that allowed their beliefs to grow and thrive. Those seeds must be replaced with healthy seeds for our society to heal. Jesus, who we call Light of the World, planted healthy seeds in Herod's time to counter the unhealthy world he was born into. Today, many of those individuals who stormed the Capital building call themselves Christian. In the midst of the chaos, there were people carrying signs saying 'Jesus saves.' There has been a twisting of Christianity by some that ignores the most basic understanding of Jesus in favor of a selfish justification of privilege.

Twenty years ago, Brueggemann saw the seeds that were already growing then. Our society has become a place where we all are invited to believe that we have a right to wealth and advantage on the backs of the poor and the disadvantaged. We see that in Erin O'Toole's misleading post on twitter. There is no acknowledgement that the common good must be considered. He is simply playing us one against another, looking for division that can work to his advantage.

You may be thinking I've gone way too political for church but we are called to be light in the darkness, followers of Jesus, who is light in the darkness. Jesus was not afraid to call out anyone who did not put love first - love of God, self and neighbour. Love your enemy. Love! That is the bottom line and even now, when I know many of us have personal struggles, we can't ignore that call.

The title of the Brueggemann article is 'Off by nine miles'. I believe we have gotten off track just as the Magi did when following the star. The Magi ended up in Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem, at a time when the leadership in Jerusalem was corrupt and Herod was willing to use violence to stamp out any threats to his power. That led to the slaughter of all the male children 2 and under living in Bethlehem and surrounding regions. Being nine miles off triggered an unspeakable tragedy.

Nine miles isn't very far. It is a sobering thought that making a nine-mile mistake can have such powerful impacts. It seems to me that is where we are today. Nine miles off. We all want to be good Christians – followers of Christ – but it is easy to get off track a little and find ourselves in a different place – a place defined by media and political agendas that have little to do with love of neighbour and lots to do with love of power. Even the light of the Christmas star can be dimmed so that it is hard to follow when the neon brightness of the society we are surrounded by clutters our view.

So, what do we do? How do we react? How do we get back on track? I believe we concentrate of the basics of faith and work to create a safe, just and welcoming community for ourselves and our neighbours. We start in the place where we are grounded in the love of God and work to make love visible for all. That is the most basic of Jesus' teachings – Love God, love yourself and love your neighbour. Love your enemy as yourself. It is in taking to heart these basic teachings that we can begin to correct our course, starting close to home. We hold ourselves accountable to these simple teachings. Do the decisions we make in our day to day lives support our love of God, love of self and love of neighbour?

We also hold our church community accountable. We take seriously the light of the Affirming Candle and the Right Relations candle. We take seriously the Christ candle and seek to be guided by these lights. In these days where we are isolating in place, we can take time to assess and to notice and to dream.

Who are the neighbours that need a little extra love these days?

Who are the neighbours being left out by unjust decisions our governments are making?

What are the things we can do individually or together to make love visible?

How do we hold ourselves and those in positions of power accountable?

It isn't enough to simply look out for ourselves. We are called to reach out beyond our doors and be the light of justice and love for our community and our world individually and as church family. That is how we find ourselves in Bethlehem rather than Jerusalem.

Now I recognize this is a challenging time and some of us don't have the energy for anything more than making it through the day. That's ok and for you, I am here to help in whatever way I can and so is Rev. Peggy.

Concentrate on doing the things that keep you grounded and that support your physical, emotional and spiritual health. We each need to find the right balance in loving self and loving neighbour at any particular time and it is hard to look out for others when we are not healthy ourselves.

But for those of us who are looking for something to think about in the days to come, here is my challenge. We can't change the world but we can change ourselves.

What changes can we make as individuals?

What changes can we make so that St. David's shines more brightly beyond our doors and into our community - a beacon that shines for the refugee and for the prisoner, for the widow and the outcast. A beacon that holds precious all the vulnerable children that the infant Jesus represents. A beacon that shows the world a path to loving our enemies as ourselves.

That is our call. That is how we correct our course so that we end up in Bethlehem, kneeling before the precious infant Christ.

I'm not sure where this will lead but I am hopeful there will be rich conversations along the way. I am hopeful we can find ways to lessen the isolation felt by many young adults and ways to support all those children who are hungry and not having their basic needs met.

Where can we do the work of Christ better, right here in this place individually and collectively?

When we are led by the light of Christ, we can and will make a difference. Let's work to make 2021 a year where we shine brightly with the light of love, bringing hope and justice everywhere we can.