

# Sermon for Epiphany, January 7, 2018 – “The Troubling Star”

2nd Sunday after Christmas/Epiphany Sunday, Year A – Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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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 so forth. Quite often, it's at the very top of Christmas trees at the highest point in the room which is probably as it should be. I remember the year when I was a kid taking part in my Confirmation class and I noticed something for the first time. It was that the star/starlight pictured on most Christmas cards was in the shape of the cross. Did you ever notice that? Possibly coincidence, but to believers like us it's much more. It's a quiet reminder of what's to come as I alluded to last week, the silent night at what seems to be the end of the story. That was my first encounter with the possibility, if you think about it, that there can be something ominous about the Christmas star, so it's interesting to note that Matthew's gospel seems to agree. In a passage that we just read Matthew describes the encounter between the wise men and King Herod. It went like this... **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.”** Matthew then recounted Herod's reaction. He wrote... **“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened – and all Jerusalem with him.”** And 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 strangely right. I say this because, at the very least he understands something important, that this rising star is big news. And he also recognizes that it's not good news for him. But Matthew is quick to note that this goes beyond what some see as Herod's usual paranoia. It's also beyond his need to protect his own interests which, as we saw last week, usually involved extreme violence. Because 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've agreed. We've always been a little leery when we see an unusual kind of star in the sky. The ancient historian Josephus noted that a star stood over the city of Jerusalem just before its fall in 70AD and there were many who thought that the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79AD 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. It makes sense, because, hey, when the heavens themselves begin to defy prediction there's no telling what might happen.

If everything falls apart where will **that** leave us? Will things be better, or worse? Will things change? Or will they stay the same? 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. There's lots of that 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.’” “Therefore, if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation...the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” So much of our God-talk points to the renewing 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 isn't something new but more along the lines of "improved." So often, it seems as if we pray only for a vaguely optimized version of the here and now. The fact is that much of the time even faithful people have difficulty imagining a world that's much different from the one that we already have. And that's the point. Of course, we can't. You and I can't. We can't, but God can. And God is longing to share that vision. He's longing to share a vision for us, for those we love, for all people, for all Creation, and all time. God is longing to make us part of something, something incredible. Something that goes far beyond our shallow invocations of our hope in the new. It seems important to name that as we begin another year thick as we are in the season of New Year's resolutions. I don't know. Even though I don't really make them I think there's something so right, maybe even holy about naming our hopes for our lives or that of the church even when they're small hopes. And there are, believe it or not, some people who actually keep their New Year's resolutions: people who've quit smoking, people who've finished degrees, people who've done things they've always wanted to do, people taking better care of their health, begun exercising (which I hope to do in 2018), and so forth. 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 is instead a new beginning. These steps toward a different future may be small, even incremental, but they aren't paltry or 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 they faithfully pursue 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 allow them to be! Learning that kind of trust can mean learning to see the world, see ourselves, see our church, in a whole new way. You might say that it's like learning to live in the light of a new star.

In a different context, business writer Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote...“Success and failure are not events, they are trajectories.” What that means is that they're paths, routes for us to take, courses for us to follow. That's true of resolutions, too. What's more, it's true of God's engagement with us and with all Creation. It's not just an event, it's 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. A star on a trajectory so broad that it wasn't on any 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, our families, our church, and thank God there is. When Herod and lots of folks in Jerusalem saw that star all they could manage to see was bad news. Maybe they lacked perspective. Maybe they lacked imagination. Maybe it was a combination of the two. Whatever the case may have been the point is that it was, and remains, good news! Truth be told it's the greatest news there is.

So, as a new year begins, as we move on from a season of taking **stock** and move into a season of taking **action**, we're invited (you, me, all of us) to push beyond all the old rules, beyond all our expectations of what can and can't be, what should and shouldn't be. We're invited to acknowledge our fears. Actually, it's important that we do so. But, we're invited even more urgently to push past them, to imagine what it might mean to live in the light of that new star. For the brokenhearted, for the broken down and the plain, old flat broke, for all the ways that brokenness, in all its forms, can shrink our world until there's no room for anything but pain and worry.

For them **and** us the light of that new star reveals a new path. A path back to the world. For those facing an unknown future, for those who are anxious or fearful, the light of that new star is a reminder – as Bob Dylan sang – that “the times, they are a’changin.” For those who are afraid to attempt new things, too afraid of who might find out, too afraid of who might laugh, the light of that star reveals a gallery of other faces eager to encourage, eager to help, eager to accompany us on 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 – even ourselves – in new ways. It is the greatest news that ever was, is, or shall be. **“Take heart,”** Jesus tells us, **“it is I – do not be afraid.”** **“Take courage; I have conquered the world!”** May we seek daily to live in the light of His promise.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.