

Epiphany Sermon

Jan 8th, 2017

Jeff Vidt

May my words be spoken in humility, delivered in compassion, received with grace, and inspire a closer walk with you, O God. In the name of the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer Amen.

Good morning. My name is Rev. Jeff Vidt. My wife Christine and I have been attending Redeemer for the better part of two years now and have loved participating and getting to know this warm and welcoming community. I serve as a spiritual care provider for a hospital and long-term care home here in Toronto. I am honored and excited to speak with you this morning.

Congratulations are in order! You made it! 2017, an exciting year is just beginning and you've made it. We have successfully survived the first week and now is the time of Epiphany! It's a wonderful time of year. Of course, all of you have left your Christmas decorations up, including the tree like proper Christians. You are now allowed to take them down. Liturgically speaking we are still mindful of the Christmas story and Epiphany celebrates the story of the Magi and God's revelation in Jesus as a full-fledged human being, birth and all. Of the many stories told around Christmas-time, the story of the three Magi is one of my

favorites. As we heard from the scriptures this morning, it's a story about a journey. The journey of three men to find a newborn king, and they are led by a miraculous star. And when the child is found, they bow in reverence and bestow gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold.

Growing up, I have fond memories of the Christmas season with my family in Indiana. Decorating the tree and putting up the nativity scene at its base was always a family event. Our nativity scene was one of those fancier ones, with good sized ceramic figures that were hand painted, a wooden stable, and a light-up star at the top. My sister and I would take turns placing each of the characters: we would start with the farm animals; the donkey, the lamb, a little cow and camel. Then we'd place the shepherds, and the Magi, Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. It wasn't a very historically accurate Nativity set so Mary, Joseph and Jesus were as white as could be, with blonde hair and blue eyes, but it had a nice effect all the same! On some odd years, I would get to place the Magi and along with that I would get to light the little electric star that hung over the stable with the angel, and when we placed the Magi we pointed them to the star that guided their way there.

I just love that image, the image of a star guiding them. For centuries humanity has gazed at the stars often asking deep questions, seeking inspiration, or just caught up in a sense of

awe and wonder. Imagine what that night sky must have looked like. There was absolutely NO light pollution in Jesus' day. It must have been an astonishing sight!

And what I'd like us to dwell on a bit today is the wonder and awe that accompanies us on our journeys, and think a bit about how God might be doing something in those moments of wonder and awe. Those moments that Isaiah described as "Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will thrill and rejoice (swell with joy;)"

I was trying to recall the last time I felt this sense of awe and wonder, and I remembered this past summer I had the privilege of enjoying my first genuine Canadian cottage experience! I visited a lake in MB and spent a few perfect days away from the hustle and bustle of the city. I enjoyed good food and good company, spending time reading and hiking and just being at the lake. One evening, we took some boats out, and at first everything was pitch black. You couldn't see the hand in front of your face. The boats had some lights so we could see each other, but that was pretty much all you could see. Darkness was everywhere.

Then when we got to a safe location, we turned out the engines and all the lights and just looked up at the stars. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I started to see small pinpricks of light. And not just a few; thousands and thousands of them! It was the most clear evening I had ever

seen, and we were far from any kind of light pollution. So many stars, and we could even see the milky way. It was the first time I ever saw the Milky Way in person. Have you ever seen this? It was so clear you could see satellites and the international space station floating high above. There were at least half a dozen shooting stars in that short span of time. It was wonderful and amazing, I could have stayed out there for hours. It all felt so vast and large, and I felt so small but it wasn't uncomfortable. It felt like a sacred moment. Then the mosquitoes arrived and would have drained us if we stayed out much longer so we hurried back.

The thought struck me, this perfect night sky could have been a little closer to what the Magi saw all those nights in the desert. And I tried to imagine what it would have been like to walk in the wilderness and every night see the astonishing display of celestial lights that grip you in wonder. And at the end of all those nights and that long journey, you find Jesus! Following one bright star out of tens of thousands in the night sky, they encounter the King they sought. And when they found Jesus and his family, they gave gifts and they worshipped him. When reading these passages this year I realized that some of the very first people to encounter Christ were not Jewish. We are told that the Magi came from the east, and are traditionally considered to be the men Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar; kings of Eastern realms. These were Gentile kings from

different countries and different races, meeting a poor Jewish family in the small town of Bethlehem. This means that one of the first examples we have of people worshipping Jesus is an international, interfaith, interclass, and interracial event. The message of Epiphany is all about God breaking down barriers, whether they be between God and humanity, or humans between themselves. This speaks to what Paul later wrote, that the mystery of Christ was one that was not just for the Jewish people, but for the Gentiles and all the world.

The Magi knew they were in the midst of something amazing and wondrous. When I am in those moments, one thing I notice is that the things that seem so big to me, those big problems that create so much stress in my life, the big things don't seem quite as big. When we are in awe, we are outside of ourselves. It is difficult to think selfishly when one is in awe. Awe is defined as a mixture of fear and reverential respect. It's these wondrous moments in our own lives, when we encounter the breaking in of God and they inspire us, energize us, and motivate us and the things that seem to separate us from one another don't seem to be quite as important.

And so I'd like to try and give you something to wonder about this morning, if I can. As a minister it's a bit tricky, because I'd like to tell you exactly how to have this

experiences, but that's not how it works. The best I can do is share something that might give you moment of wonder, something that might may spark something in you.

And so It's here that I want to try something a bit unorthodox and perhaps controversial. I assure you it's all perfectly innocent. All of you who are able to search the internet on your phones, I want you to take them out. We're going to try looking up a picture together. This may be the only chance you get to acceptably take out your phone during church service, so you'll want to take advantage of the opportunity. Open up your internet application head over to google, and search for the phrase "pale blue dot." Pale blue dot, got it? What should come up as the first link is a wikipedia article with the same name. The first picture along with that article is what we are looking for. For those of you who don't have access to the image, it's easy enough for me to describe: It's a very grainy photo with lots of dark space. You see what look to be bands of colored light stretching from the top of the image to the bottom, and in the brightest band of light on the right about halfway down, there's a small speck of blue light. That little bright speck is earth.

Here's a little context. This image is the last image that the Voyager spacecraft took before it left our Solar System in 1990. It had completed its original mission of cataloging

data and taking photos of various planets including Jupiter, Saturn, and the moon Titan. Just before it went out of range of our Solar System well past Pluto, it was commanded by NASA to turn its camera around, and take one last image of earth. In that image, the earth is over 6 million kilometers away. Carl Sagan, the astronomer and author, penned these words upon reflection of this image:

“Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.”

-- Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994

So, go do some stargazing. Go to the museum, look at some art or some fossils; we have a excellent one right next door. Listen to a symphony. Treat yourself to some wonder. Pay attention to those things that give you a sense of awe, and wonder, and meaning. It may be God reaching out asking you to come out and play a bit and grow closer to one another.

In a way, this church has been on a long journey a bit like the Magi. In the process of seeking a new incumbent we have attempted to be faithful to what we believe God would have us be in our community, knowing that God has been preparing the right person to join us. But I also wish to posit that God has been changing us as we have been seeking, making our community the right fit for the person who will join us. So during this Epiphany season, let us be mindful of God in our midst, continue to be faithful to who we are in our community, and be open to the amazing and wondrous ways God may surprise us in the new year.