

STARS AND ANGELS
[written in oral form]

Matthew 2:1-13; Isaiah 60:1-6
Epiphany Sunday, Year C

January 6, 2019
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About two weeks ago, my grandson called me. He asked,
"When can a person see the farthest?"

I thought for a moment, remembering that on clear, level ground, because of the curvature of the earth,
we can see about 12.5 Km.

So I answered, I suppose from on top of the highest mountain.

He joyfully replied, "NO, at night time when the sky is clear, we can see the stars."
Ouch.... I was stung by an eleven year old,.... but he was right!

The stars are millions and millions of miles away,.... and on a clear night we can see their illumination.
A New Year can bring illumination.

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Each New Year, prompts us to reflect....And to look ahead with resolution and hope. Yet, hope seems  
to be more difficult to conjure up this year.

The economy is having some warning tremors.

We are doing little to alter our impact on climate change.

There are more and more desperate refugees.

The rise of populist tyrants is unnerving, to cite a few bleak examples.

Then, I saw the movie "Vice", Friday evening. An excellent movie about former Vice President Dick  
Cheney,....yet the inside view of corrupt power was very troubling.

There are many reasons for despair.

In addition, many of us have personal burdens and fears that weigh us down.

When life feels overwhelming, it is tempting to look another way.....or to just play a game on our  
phone.

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Thinking about dark times,

I was recently reminded of my visit to Dachau, a Nazi concentration camp.

On the wall in the museum at the Dachau camp is a large and stunning photograph of a mother and her
little girl standing in line for the gas chamber. It's a photograph, not a painting.

The child, who is walking in front of her mother, does not know where she is going. The mother, who
walks behind, does know, but is helpless to stop the tragedy.

In her helplessness she performs the only act of love left to her. She places her hands over her child's
eyes so she will at least not see the horror to come.

When people enter into the museum, they do not hurriedly whisk by this photo. They pause.

They almost feel the pain.

And, deep inside, I think that they are saying, "O God, don't let that be all that there is."

Some respond to the photo with a sense of hopelessness.

Some respond with anger and a resolve to act in God's behalf--to do judgment / redemptive violence.
..... And, they mean well.

Another response is to see the Epiphany of the moment:
that life is bigger than we are; that God is all that we have, and
in spite of the darkness and evil, God Must be in the world.

God MUST be in the world.
In our darkness, can we see that hope.....that star?
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Both of the passages today were written in times of despair / in dark times.  
Isaiah encourages the people in captivity to "Arise and see the light of God's glory....even in their  
darkness.  
Verse four implores, "Lift up your eyes" and look around -- Look for God.  
The writer also reminds the reader that God is for all people / all nations,.....not just the presumed  
chosen few.  
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The Magi story in Matthew, no doubt was inspired by this Isaiah passage.
This Epiphany story includes the very nasty tyrant, Herod. Wise men are featured. They are also
known as astrologers or Magi. They were seekers, and likely influenced by Zoroastrianism,... which is a
monotheistic faith that influenced Judaism, too. They are open to divine signs. Thus, a star has key role,
and so does an angel.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph play minor parts.

This story has wonderful and beautiful lessons.
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But first, a digression about stars and angels.

Angels are cool.  
There are numerous references to them in the Bible.  
They are referred to as supernatural heavenly beings that serve God.  
The Psalmist mentioned that they are watching over humans.  
More often, angels are messengers caring a divine messages to someone.  
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Stars are also cool and amazing.

In Jeremiah [33:22] and in 2nd Kings [21], a sky full of stars is referred to as a heavenly host.
Do you recall Luke's birth narrative....the heavenly host...praising God. Fascinating.

Up north, away from light pollution, the multitude of brilliant stars can take your breath away. They are
awe inspiring,....as if singing praises to God.

I can easily appreciate the indigenous peoples regard for stars, too.

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So,...imagine the power of an unique and bright star. Perhaps, it was Halley's comet; it doesn't matter. A star brighter than all others speaks volumes.

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Following that star, the Magi stopped and asked King Herod for directions. Which was a respectful thing to do in a foreign land.

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As I said, Herod was nasty. He killed countless people who he perceived as threats, including members of his own family.

Moreover, this is a reminder that Government policy and narrative do matter. It affects most everyone, and changes how people behave.

When Herod was afraid, so were all the citizens.

Herod decided to kill baby Jesus, who he feared would be a threat to Herod's illegitimate claim to power.

**His evil action.....chased Jesus away.**

The tyrant Herod caused Jesus to leave. He caused God's love and the saviour of the world.....to go away from his nation.

Think about that.

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As we all know, the Magi found and worshipped Jesus.

Then, they were warned in a dream to avoid Herod and return home another way. They were warned.

Joseph was also warned in a dream that they should flee to Egypt. The text said it was an angel in a dream,and I think it was angel in the Magi's dream, too.

In addition, I'm inclined to think that the parents of the other 6-8 children, of that age living in Bethlehem, were also warned.

God must have....

Yet,they did not flee. ????

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Regardless, take note that the Magi did receive a divine message from God. The Magi were foreigners; they were outsiders!..... or were they?

Just like the Isaiah text, this story presents the message that God connects to all people. Christ is for outsiders / for everyone. God is a God of all people / all things.

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Some other lessons from the Magi story:

God is NOT on Herod's side.

God is not with political leaders who lie, deceive,.... who are Exclusive, who are unjust. God is not for those who build walls.

God is not with leaders who push violent policies that hurt and destroy others, including creation. And woe.....to those who succumb to such folly/ who **allow** such evil ways,... for they are pushing Christ away.

Think about that.

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Another lesson is about responding to God's messages, even if they come from a star,....a dream or an angel.

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However, we are more enlightened now. We don't look for messages in the stars. We tend to reduce dreams as merely our brain exercising and problem solving, and angels.....well,..... Nice concept, but.....really?

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I'm not suggesting we yield to superstition, read tea leaves and or delve into the realm of divination, using Tarot cards and such.

I'm not informed enough to assess the value of those things.

I AM proposing that we be open to and seeking God in all things. We can look with openness and expectations, but not with answers in mind. We know how to do this. It's just a matter of sharpening our focus.

We are tuned into a lot of things, such as the sound of a phone call.

Which reminds me of the time I changed the incoming call sound on my phone. I changed it to Bob Dylan's "Hey Mister Tambourine Man." Not long after installing it, I was walking through a store, and I heard "Hey Mister Tambourine Man.", and thought "OH Wow, I love that song, how nice. I can't believe they're playing it.

I totally missed the call.....because I didn't recognize the connection. Recognizing the source is essential.

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I like to think that angels are present, and may have a message from God to me. If that feels uncomfortable to you, then consider a helpful person an angel,... or...call it the Holy Spirit.... or Simply God reaching out.

But, tune in.....look for it.....expect God to give you a message. Look and expect God to be reaching out and trying to connect, trying to help.

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Our culture is full of a cacophony of information and messages, and all that is very distracting. It can make us dull.

We tend to glance a search for the divine, and it is much like looking at the urban night sky. We see a few hazy stars, and that's it.

We need to clear out the clutter and pollution to get a better view.
That could mean meditation,... Bible reading, listening to good music or whatever works for you. We just need to do it. If not, we'll miss the stars and the angels,.....and worse--a message from God.

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It's most unfortunate that we tend to see best in dark times.

Stars do shine brighter in deep darkness.

People who are near death and are graciously receiving death, tend to transcend into a very vibrant and spiritual reality.

They see things differently. They discover what is truly important and what is divine.

It's too bad,.....if the awareness only comes, for some, at the end of life.

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I firmly believe that, with faith, we can Arise, Lift up our eyes.....and grasp so much more.

I wonder what God's message is for you and me,.....and where we will find it.