

NO SURPRISE
[written in oral form]

Isaiah 60:1-6
Epiphany A

January 5, 2020
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If the Magi story were to be in today's context, it would be a very different story.
First, we would not identify them as men. We'd call them astronomers with a religious prophecy fascination.
Second, there would be little or no surprise in their journey.

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The story: they noticed a new star in the sky, perhaps an exploding super nova. This happens, now and then.  
Recalling OT predictions and common lore, they would Google for more details. They would learn that a new star could be an announcement for the birth of a new leader, perhaps the Messiah.  
The more than likely location, as per the scriptures, would be Bethlehem--no surprise there.

Being Persians, from Iran, they would carefully travel through Iraq, travelling at night to see the star AND to avoid satellite surveillance and drone attacks.  
They would sneak into Israel through Jordan. They would not consult Netanyahu for directions, because they had GPS, and they were keenly aware of how they would be received. Iranians visiting a potential Jewish Messiah in the occupied territory would not be viewed favourably by the Israeli authorities.

Before they embarked on their journey to visit a very special baby, they would have checked out Mary and Joseph's wish list on Amazon. They would not have been surprised to see items of universal currency listed, such as gold and precious incenses.  
They assumed that the young family would soon be refugees since governments do not like threats to their authority. Universal currencies, such as gold, come in handy for refugees on the run.

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After visiting Jesus and presenting their gifts, they discovered, and no surprise, that social media was humming about their visit to Bethlehem. Since, they were "wise" people, they had Google maps chart a different way home, avoiding toll roads and highways.

They left, as did Mary, Joseph with Jesus, end of story. No surprise.
Oh,.....it turns out that the new star was a supernova, and no surprise.

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This version was not very exciting, but at least we were not surprised.

It seems we have a surprise aversion, these days.

Generally, we diligently work at limiting surprises in our lives.  
Thanks to the internet, we have been quite efficient at reducing surprises.  
TripAdvisor will inform us about what to expect before we go out. It will warn us about which restaurant or entertainment to avoid.

Google Maps will alert us to traffic cameras and congestion ahead so we can evade the surprise of a ticket or being stuck in traffic.

We can get updates on games or current events. No need to be surprised when reading the morning paper....which is becoming a relic.

We plan our careers, our education and goals to minimize surprises.

We do not even want to be surprised by the weather, and expect a long range forecast to be accurate.

It seems, we do not like surprises.

I think much of the reason is that because we are so proficient at controlling outcomes, the only surprises we receive are negative ones.

Surprise has become a negative experience.

Think about it.

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When things do not go as planned, it is usually a negative surprise.

When our plastic wrapped food contains contaminants, it is a bad surprise.

Mike Babcock was not the messiah after all.

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What we may call a good surprise is often the result of low expectations or just fortunate luck.

Such as, it only took 50 minutes to drive to the Toronto airport, or...

the freezing rain was not so bad, after all.

Or, Trump did not tweet today.

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For the most part, we try to avoid surprises,.....because they are typically undesirable.

Aiming for predictability is safer. No surprise to that.

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Likewise, I think we tend to limit and control our expectations for God. I wonder if we have pigeon-holed God / confined God to our defensible concept?

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Can God only do the mystical, the spiritual and the comforting stuff?

How would we define a God miracle?.....maybe we would not consider a definition?

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Imagine this scenario:

Your partner or someone you love, insists you join them on a dubious errand. It does not make sense, but you go along. Also, that person insists on driving.

Half way to the stated destination, the car is driven to a near empty parking lot, and stopped. That person you love, pulls out a blindfold, and asks you to securely cover your eyes with it.

You are told a surprise is in store for you.

Would you go along? Would you be willing to be driven blindly to wherever?

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I think most of us would,.....and why?

Because you trust that person..... You trust that person because you love that person, and you know that person loves you.

The key elements: Love and trust.....and both invite the potential for the unexpected / the uncontrollable.

Love and trust can make room for surprise..... a good surprise.
Yet,.....there is the potential.....for a bad surprise, too.

This is where we are at. This is the pivot point.

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The Isaiah text presents wonderful, artistic images.  
An awe inspiring sunrise comes to mind.

"Arise, shine for your light has come....the Lord will arise upon you."  
This is the picture of the Glory of God--of God's revelation of power and holiness.

"Lift up your eyes and look around"  
From all over the world, they will come to you.  
From far away, all people will acknowledge and affirm you.  
The sun will rise on you. Your day,... your day is about to begin.

Caravans will swarm to you, and some from distant lands will bring you royal gifts of frankincense and gold.

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Inspiring hope is the purpose of the Isaiah text.
One of the authors of Isaiah likely wrote all of the last 6 chapters.
Those chapters are uplifting hopeful messages for depressed and distraught people. It's a familiar message.

Over and over again, the Bible strives to implant the hopeful message of God leaping into the world / into our lives.

Emmanuel -- God with us. How can that be?
Yet, we embrace the Gospels. We believe in Jesus.

Even so, do we believe the messages about God?

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The Biblical messages / the Biblical stories do NOT really challenge our higher level of reasoning.  
True, scholars dissect and analyze them endlessly, yet what is the point? Where is the message taking us?

The Biblical messages, from Genesis, through the prophets and to the Gospels with Jesus and beyond do challenge us.

They challenge our level of faith.  
The Biblical stories challenge / test our level of faith.

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I dare say, something is missing in most of us / in most contemporary people. That something is daily living with the thrill of expecting a good surprise.....a good surprise from God.

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I will repeat what I said earlier about being open to surprise.

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Yet,.....there is the potential.....for a bad surprise, too.

This is where we are at. This is the pivot point.

And,..... it all comes down to faith.

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We would likely let a loved one surprise us because of love and trust.
That willingness is faith.

Do we know that God loves you and me?

Do we love God? Do we trust God?
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I am not making these questions up. This is all in the Bible, and they have confronted people before the first word was written down.

Do we love God? Do we know that God loves us?
What is our level of faith?
Will God,.....can God,.... is God able to leap into our lives today.....and surprise us?

Do we trust it will be good? ??????

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Perhaps, we would rather trust sound logic and reason.  
Perhaps we would rather have certainty????

Certainty is the opposite of faith.  
Sound, rational thinking and good judgment must serve us, but what is the risk if we serve it?

What happens if we live by reason and predictability?  
No surprise.

Here is the pivot point--our tension.

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What is the reason for the Magi? What was Isaiah saying?

What are we looking forward to, and how are we going to get there?

"Lift up your eyes and look around."

"The glory of the Lord has risen upon you"

It is Epiphany.