

Finding Wonder and Wisdom in 2018

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Based on Matthew 2:1-12

Over Christmas and New Years our family clamoured into our trusty van - several times - to visit relatives around Southern Ontario. Maybe - you have similar travel stories? Some slowed down by snow at night and some made while squinting into the bright, winter sun by day. I am not complaining, it is our decision to travel over the holidays, and always worth the effort once we arrive. Perhaps it is not as fun to unpack, to do laundry and re-organize ourselves on the other end of each journey but this is the consequence of time spent feasting, playing games and in late-night conversation. I feel fortunate that our families live within driving distance – knowing that this is not the case for everyone.

I am also aware that many in our midst have been touched by illness, by unexpected loss and grief in recent weeks - and this can certainly reshape gatherings – it can create a deep heaviness below the surface of polite conversation. For so many touched by loss - this season, please know that you are held in prayer – May strength and resilience walk with you - enough for each day.

I have entitled my sermon this morning *Finding Wonder and Wisdom in 2018*. This is in part because I so treasured the short dramas that took place at the end of each Advent service, leading us to the light of Christ - this Christmas. I want to thank Thea Andres and Eileen Lebold for the ways that they embodied Wonder and Wisdom for us all. These dramas from the Leader magazine were simple but provocative: How do we find God? How is God at Work in the World around us? How does Wonder learn to see with Wisdom? And how is Wisdom fed by Wonder?

Over Christmas, in empty unscheduled space and during time spent travelling I reflected on where I might look for Wonder and Wisdom... Social Media certainly provides many rabbit holes for us to explore. I think that slices of light – of living life with Wonder and Wisdom – can appear from time to time along Facebook and Instagram feeds; but which picture, caption, or video do we choose to give our attention to? To like/to love? There are just so many items for me to notice, so many sparkly stories to catch my eye - that I run the risk of growing indifferent from being so visually overfed.

There is a funny *Saturday Night Live* sketch about this – (at least I thought it was funny) - the scene opens with a guy sitting lethargically on his couch, scrolling through his computer – and then – all at once - he has these fans growing around him, cheering him on in his Livingroom as he presses – “like” in a very dramatic way – to different social justice campaigns on Facebook – It is as if his ability to press a encouraging emoji - from the safety of his couch - is somehow saving the world from hate and indifference...Maybe a harsh commentary? – but one that encourages me to put down my screen to think of how I can better heart my family, my neighbourhood, the actual people around me. I think that a positive message sent out is always a good one, but I can only do so much from behind a screen...

I tell myself that I scroll mostly to keep in touch with people. I scroll also to learn about voices for peace from many diverse places around the world and stories about resilience in the face of so many harsh realities. The heartache of other human beings across the planet and close to home weave through my feed - along with recipe ideas, new fashions tips, and funny family photos.

How do we hold these realities together? How do we not become paralysed by the darkness; the painful truths all around us as we read the paper, watch the news and turn our calendars to a New Year. It is so easy to get overwhelmed. I think that social media can promote this sense of being flooded and immobilized by the sheer volume of its images, stories, and ads that flash across our screens.

As we travelled over the holidays, I mulled over the long journey of those ancient men from the East. The ones who studied the stars, most likely in Persia. Who were led by, I imagine, a combination of study and wonder on a many month trip to distant Bethlehem in Judea. Matthew 2:1-12 all at once asks for Wonder to be present with us - as we imagine the long dessert journey...and the star? What could it have been? A comet? The aligning of the planets under an astrological sign? It was not unusual, Scholars tell us, for these men known as the Magi to link the patterns and presence of the stars to the birth of great Kings. What might have been unusual, however is how far they went this time and how little we ever hear about them after their return home.

Logically, the Magi stop at Herod's palace thinking that this must be the place where the new King is born. Herod, thank goodness, does not have a twitter feed. In fact, he is a far more dangerous kind of power hungry leader at this point in his career - he appears crafty and conniving. He does not seem to share all his inside thoughts with the world (as other current leaders may appear to be doing). He is calculating and has a strong track record of assassinating those who he perceives to threaten his power. Some of those assassinated under Herod's reign include: his wife, his mother-in-law, three of his own sons, and at the hour of his own death (guessing that no one would mourn him) several notable leaders were also assassinated to ensure the tears of the people (Barclay, 2001 taken from the writings of Josephus: 1st century CE Roman-Jewish historian).

History is a funny thing, because we do not have the whole story...Herod was once called "Herod the Great", He was the only ruler known to keep the peace of Palestine during his long reign. He was a great builder. And built the Temple in Jerusalem; He could be generous. In times of difficulty he cancelled taxes to make things easier for the people; and during the famine of 25BC he actually melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for staving people... (Josephus, *Antiquities*).

Where is Wisdom found in the Epiphany story? Were the Magi from the east later called "Wise" because they had the ability to track the stars - or because they could discern the authenticity of the little family now living in a house in Bethlehem **against** a Powerful King with a terrible character flaw?

Imagine the scene of the tired men, after months of travel - finding a small boy of humble means in the company of two young parents; but appearing to be led with the kind of wisdom that can see beyond circumstance - they fall to their knees and worship the illogical truth before them; that the light had entered the world in an unexpected way, turning great kingdoms upside down. The young child invites - it seems - the far reaches of the world to encounter him. And the Magi extend gifts that were both symbolic and helpful to the family who would soon flee from King Herod's tyranny.

At my In-laws home, at Christmastime, we play many, many games. I have learned to both accept this and to get on board with it 😊! A new game for us this year is called *Chronology*. Maybe you've played it? It is a card game where each player receives a historical event, without the date, and is given the task to place the card in the right chronological order. The first player to ten cards, placed in proper order wins.

Some cards boast dates about when technologies were patented, when natural disasters occurred, when countries were liberated, when laws were made or abolished, when leaders were commemorated, when people died, or were defeated, and so on. Overall, I enjoyed it. Despite its Western and mostly American history leanings, it was an engaging game of trivia.

But as I looked at the line of cards that began to form in front of each player, it seemed strange that the historical events that created the most positive change in the world were not at all distinguished from events that caused the greatest devastations in history. Maybe it was a good exercise in not being judgemental of those who lived during a certain time and place. But I found myself wondering about the stories and details behind the historic events. I wondered too about the many smaller stories, of light and substance that are not widely known – the stories that simply do not make the stack.

I can't help but wonder what events will be recorded on the cards from 2018?

May we walk with Wisdom and Wonder into the year ahead of us - knowing that we are part of the fabric of history and that we also carry our own, valuable stories. Our stories are shaped by the great stories we have heard. The surprising manifestation of God in human form. The divine embodied in a small child, fleeing with his family for safety – the salvation of the world resting on his tiny frame. May the Epiphany story remind us to ask bold questions and to be open to the unexpected places where wisdom may lead us.

As we carry the light into this New Year may we continue to cultivate **bright passion** and **deep awareness** that points us to God's presence in the world. (Amen)