

Travelers' Wisdom

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Readings:

Isaiah 60.1 – 6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Matthew 2.1 – 12

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. When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all of the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring the word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the

king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

It is one of the most wonderful stories we have – splendid kings or scholars or magi, quietly traversing mountains and deserts on camels, with a retinue most likely, a caravan, carrying exotic gifts, searching the skies and the ancient manuscripts to discern the way forward. The story has sparked our imaginations over and over, as writers and musicians have added details, imagined new chapters, and simply let the power of such a fabulous tale lead in all kinds of directions. What if there was a fourth wise man, Artaban, who got lost? What if the three had names too - Melchior, Balthasar, Caspar. Could there have been one who loved licorice? What if - remember this line - 'and one of them is black'? Could they have stopped for the night at a widow's home and brought along her little son, newly healed of lameness, offering his crutch?

I had intended today to look at the story of the three travelers to see what their journey might offer us for our own spiritual journeys – things like: go places worth going, check the map before you set out, be prepared to be surprised when you arrive, and of course, when you get near the destination, ask directions from the locals. There is good material in the passage for all that – [but really we can each do it ourselves.]

I think instead on this first Sunday of a New Year, we should spend some unstructured time just thinking about what we have seen over the past week in the reports from Gaza. I don't have a particular set of reflections to offer, just the images we have all seen of destruction, of children dead, and since last night, the troops moving across the border. Of increasing vulnerability. Of irreconcilable perspectives flooding the newspapers and airwaves. Of calls for ceasefire that fall on deaf ears. Of apparently infinite willingness to subject civilians to the torments of war. ... So just

take a moment to offer up the images and insights and feelings you have about this situation.

Recognizing this, can anyone doubt that humanity is in need of redemption? Can anyone dispute that the original blessings of life and love, blessings of abundance and goodness are pushed aside again and again by death and hatred, poverty and destruction? That the human condition is painfully twisted. It isn't just today or just Gaza – it is us.

Living as we do here in this place, this context of middle class Canada, many find it difficult to know how to respond, even what to think. Who is at fault, who do we support, should we stand clearly on a side, take a position? How, if we were determined to act, would our action be most effective, more than an inconsequential gesture that allows us to self-congratulate – is there something we can do that would concretely contribute to ending the agony of victimization and oppression that this situation creates?

Let me add just two observations to the mix of thoughts and feelings that arise. First, a proviso: as Christians, we have to be acutely conscious and cautious of both the appearance and the reality of anti-Semitism. The Christian church has been, historically, the most vicious proponent and practitioner of the exclusion, harassment and torment of the Jews which contributed so much to the current impasse. We may not have been part of this personally, and we may - we do - find anti-Semitism repugnant, but we have to wear it, it is our piece. Christians – even in Toronto – do not begin as neutral outsiders in this terrible puzzle.

Second thought - what ought we to look for, to pray for? The Psalm that Glenn led us in was written to celebrate the coronation of King Solomon – and yet 2500 years later it still describes what is needed. With the Psalmist we call for the leader, and with the kings we seek the leadership that

*... will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.*

*... who will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.*

*... who will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.*

That must be guiding question – who will do those things?

I'm going to return to the story now, and recall for you the wonderful poetry of TS Eliot:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times when we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

*Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wineskins.
But there was no information, and so we continued*

*And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.*

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

When the three wise ones traveled through the starlit darkness toward the baby king, they were seeking sustenance. They carried with them the gifts the most precious and most meaningful, as they sought sustenance for all the depth and breadth of the journey of life. We come now to the table of Jesus – that baby they were seeking – the table of Jesus' last supper, the night before his death. As we too seek to be sustained in depth and breadth, may we too come with all that we have and all that we are. Let us pray,

Loving God, you find us here perplexed and disheartened by the world you love. Remind us of your presence, reassure us that your love is at the heart of life, and guide us in your service,

we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.