

The Sunday Missive – January 2, 2022

The Second Sunday in Christmastide

Hymn 115 What child is this?

What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading (refrain).

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh, come, peasant, king, to own him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone him (refrain).

Collect of the Day

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 31:7-14

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

Psalm 147

Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God* ***For the Lord is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.***

The Lord builds up Jerusalem* ***And gathers the outcasts of Israel.***

The Lord heals the brokenhearted* ***And binds up all their wounds.***

The Lord determines the number of the stars* ***And gives to all of them their names.***

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power* ***With understanding beyond all measure.***

The Lord lifts up the downtrodden* ***And casts the wicked to the ground.***

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving* ***Make melody to our God on the lyre.***

Who covers the heavens with clouds and sends rain for the earth* ***Who makes grass to grow on the hills.***

Who gives to the animals their food* ***And to the young ravens when they cry.***

The Lord's delight is not in the strength of the horse* ***Nor in the speed of a runner.***

But the Lord takes pleasure in those who humble themselves* ***Whose hope in God's steadfast love.***

Ephesians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

Hymn 98 Unto us a boy is born

Unto us a boy is born! The King of all creation,
Came he to a world forlorn, the Lord of every nation.

Now may Mary's son, who came so long ago to love us,
Lead us all with hearts aflame unto the joys above us.

Unto us a boy is born! The King of all creation,
Came he to a world forlorn, the Lord of every nation.

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 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 me 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.

Promises Foretold - Christmas 2C

Our family has strong connections in Cincinnati, Ohio, so stops have been frequent over the years in the busy airport there, which actually sits across the Ohio River in the currently beleaguered State of Kentucky. Just eleven miles down the road from the airport, one can have the bizarre experience of visiting the Creation Museum, where geology, archaeology, paleontology, anthropology and many other fields of scientific inquiry are blithely dismissed in the pursuit of Biblical literalism. Notwithstanding the countless scientific developments that provide the means to operate this state-of-the-art museum complex, with its steel and glass structures, special effects-rich film presentations, fast food cafeterias, heavily armed security guards and opulent gift shops, the obvious paradox is never addressed with curious visitors. You just have to agree to not think too hard and go with the flow. The unstated philosophy seems to be: Science is useful, unless it conflicts with our mythology.

This time of year, when we read of the Magi visiting Jesus, it's not easy to cast stones at the Creationists. As many have pointed out, the star the Three Kings follow behaves as no star ever did or could. Not only did it move through the sky over a period of time (maybe it was a comet), but they could tell the particular dwelling to which the star guided them. As James Adams points out, "If anybody in New England looked up and saw a star, they wouldn't be able to tell if it was over New York City or Cambridge, Massachusetts. If any star came close enough to earth to distinguish such a precise location, the whole eastern seaboard would be incinerated along with the rest of the world." Even before there was such thing as astronomy, everyone knew that stars do not behave the way this one in Matthew's gospel does, so our joy and meaning must come, not from insisting that there must have been dinosaurs on Noah's Ark as does the Creation Museum. We are told they were restricted to juveniles for size and weight. One envisions a kind of a reverse carnival ride testing point at the gangplank. Rather we take our understanding and our hope from allowing the stories – of the Magi and indeed the rest of the Gospels -- to resonate with us as permanently and powerfully as they did with those who first told them.

It helps to know that the ancients knew the stars as living beings – with personalities and intentions. It wasn't until the Second Council of Constantinople in 533, that church leaders decided the stars themselves did not reason, nor have souls. We don't have to know the Magi were following a comet or a celestial phenomenon that contains scientific congruence with the fossil record, any more than we need to know how the breath of God is in the consciousness of humankind. Those intrepid spiritual adventurers spent their lives gazing upon the heavens. They sought clues as to the nature of God's intention for them, and found answers in whatever it was they saw. The answers were: "Mount up. Ride on. Bring gifts." And so they did. Was it a star with a personality? Was it an angel of the Lord? What difference can it possibly make?

At the very least, this story served to validate the presence and the message of Jesus the Christ well and permanently beyond the confines of the Jews of Galilee to whom it was first conveyed. King Herod, who was literally King of the Jews, is said to have done everything in his power to destroy the possibility of God incarnate in Bethlehem. But these curious foreign strangers could see, even across the desert sands, how Jesus' birth carried promise for all of humankind.

Promise, yes, but not untold promise. Aristotle the Greek philosopher is, of course famous for his mastery of rhetoric: “Tell them what you’re going to tell them, then tell them what you want to tell them, then tell them what you told them,” is the modern English boil-down of his approach to effective public speaking. And our Biblical canon is nothing if not good rhetoric. Today’s readings give us a neat and powerful of example of how it works.

Jeremiah tells us what the Lord is going to do: “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and be radiant over the grain, the wine, and the oil; their life shall become like a watered garden and they shall never languish again.” Not only that, but, “Sing aloud with gladness for I am going to gather you from the farthest parts of the earth. I will let you walk by brooks of water, in a straight path on which you shall not stumble.” That’s what the Lord has planned. The Gospel itself says what the Lord is doing: “Here is the child who has been born king of the Jews;” declare the Magi, “we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” And we, the followers of Jesus can never stop telling what it is that has been done: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who chose us before the foundation of the world. He has made known to us the mystery of his will, a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in heaven and on earth, so that we, might live for the praise of his glory.” Amen.

There is a fourth step, one which Aristotle leaves out, but Jesus does not, nor does Matthew, nor must we: “In him you also, when you hear the word of truth and believe in him, are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit... Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you; for lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Unlike the rhetoriticians, even those as great as Aristotle, our scriptural stories are not meant to convince, so much as to convey. If we have been met by the living Christ, and consider ourselves blessed thereby, blessed enough to possess hope, we will know ourselves to be obliged, even compelled to protect and nurture that gift of hope by passing it along, sharing it abroad, giving it away. We now know the future has already happened in Christ, and the past is yet to come, when all will again be God’s perfection. Meanwhile, whatever else we may do with ourselves, our only truly necessary occupation is to describe, portray and embody those certainties for others.

Archaeologists recently unearthed a temple in a long-abandoned town in Galilee, where Jesus appears to have lived: Magdala. In the center of the worship space is a small-scale replica of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Those pesky scientists again, have speculated that this replica, unusually depicted with images of the Great Temple far away from that spot, might represent an early venture into the theology that says God is with us wherever we may go, not just back at headquarters. The implication is that the Magi came to Bethlehem, and once they left and went their way homeward by another road, the glory of the Christ went with them in their hearts. This can happen even when those who are running headquarters, are horribly bereft of grace.

The implication is that what took place in the Magi can take place in each of us. When the psalmist rhapsodizes, "How lovely is thy dwelling place to me O God of hosts..." that dwelling place is no longer just for one chosen, literal-minded people in one chosen place and time. How hard this has been for us to accept. We can indeed and forever sing the Lord's song in a strange land, because it is in our hearts that the roads to Zion are built to last.

The Prayers of the People

I ask your prayers for God's people throughout the world; for this gathering; and for all ministers and people. Pray for the Church.

I ask your prayers for peace; for goodwill among nations; and for the well-being of all people. Pray for justice and peace.

I ask your prayers for all those in need of healing and strength, especially Karen and Kyle, Carrie and Bill and all who have been made ill or bereft by the Covid pandemic, natural disasters or human cruelty and neglect. Pray for the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison and all those in any need or trouble.

I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or deeper self-knowledge and faith . Pray that they may find and be found by Christ.

I ask your prayers for the departed, especially those we name now in our hearts. Pray for those who have died.

I ask your prayers of thanksgiving for the blessings of this life, especially those we name now in our hearts.

Praise God for those in every generation in whom Christ has been honoured. Pray that we may have grace to glorify Christ in our own day by ordering our lives according to his Word. **Amen.**

O God of love, you are the true sun of the world, evermore rising and never going down. We pray you to shine in our hearts, that the darkness of sin and the mist of error being driven away, we may this day, and all our life long, walk without stumbling in the way you have prepared for us, which is Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in glory everlasting. **Amen**

Now may the One who loved the world enough to send the first and only child to live among us in great humility, open your eyes to look for the day when that child comes again. And thus, the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer be with you today and remain with you always. **Amen.**

New Day's Lyric

May this be the day
We come together.
Mourning, we come to mend,
Withered, we come to weather,
Torn, we come to tend,
Battered, we come to better.
Tethered by this year of yearning,
We are learning
That though we weren't ready for this,
We have been readied by it.
We steadily vow that no matter
How we are weighed down,
We must always pave a way forward.

This hope is our door, our portal.
Even if we never get back to normal,
Someday we can venture beyond it,
To leave the known and take the first steps.
So let us not return to what was normal,
But reach toward what is next.

What was cursed, we will cure.
What was plagued, we will prove pure.
Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree,
Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee,
Where we weren't aware, we're now awake;
Those moments we missed
Are now these moments we make,
The moments we meet,
And our hearts, once all together beaten,
Now all together beat.

Come, look up with kindness yet,
For even solace can be sourced from sorrow.
We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday,
But to take on tomorrow.

We heed this old spirit,
In a new day's lyric,
In our hearts, we hear it:
For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne.
Be bold, sang Time this year,
Be bold, sang Time,
For when you honor yesterday,
Tomorrow ye will find.
Know what we've fought
Need not be forgotten nor for none.
It defines us, binds us as one,
Come over, join this day just begun.
For wherever we come together,
We will forever overcome.

Amanda Gorman