

Epiphany Sunday
January 3, 2021
Matthew 2: 1-12
Pastor Ann Hultquist

For weeks before the Winter Solstice, news sources and social media were all over the story of the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn in the sky. You probably heard that one of the wonders of the event was that it hadn't taken place at night since 1226--in 1623 the planets did align this closely, but it was during the daylight so it wasn't visible from most places on earth. "Close" is a relative term, of course, as scientists reminded us that the planets were still hundreds of millions of miles apart in space.

The event captured our attention though, didn't it? Imagine--seeing something that hadn't occurred for hundreds of years, and that won't be visible like this again until 2080. People went outside just after sunset and used telescopes and binoculars to view it for themselves. And, of course, the other reason it captured us was because some call the convergence the Christmas Star--the bright and shining light that led the magi to Jesus in Bethlehem.

Today's Gospel is one that captures our imagination, too. If you grew up with or have seen children's Christmas Pageants, you know that the 3 kings are often the conclusion, with shiny paper crowns and robes, carrying their gifts of decorated shoeboxes. They kneel on the already crowded stage along with shepherds, sheep, angels, and the Holy Family. You might remember that in Augustana's virtual pageant this year, one of the magi continually asked "Are we there yet?!"

Another pastor shared that one Christmas Eve during the Children's Sermon she was telling the Christmas story from Luke and showing the kids pictures in a book. As she turned each page, one little boy pointed to the characters and asked "Is *that* the bad guy?!" over and over. There isn't a 'bad guy' in Luke, but in the verses we heard today from Matthew, there is a really, really bad guy--Herod the Great.

We know about Herod not just from the Bible, but from historical sources. Desperate to keep his power, he killed his second wife, their two sons, her

grandfather, and her mother. And right before he himself died, he had his first-born son murdered. It might not have been the smartest thing for the magi to tell King Herod that they were searching for the *new* king. It's a good thing that they were warned in a dream not to go back to the palace, and took a different road home. Because when Herod was frightened, people died.

We don't have to use our imaginations much to know what that fearful or continually grasping kind of power looks like, do we? Although we don't live in an occupied country as Mary and Joseph did, we don't have to look very far to see how power and even force are wielded today.

Cries for justice that we have heard and will continue to hear remind us that for some people, the color of your skin means power and also the right to disempower others. While millions of people right now wait at food banks and for unemployment, others are making bank in the booming stock market. The youngest, the oldest, the poor, the disabled are pushed aside and disregarded in favor of the latest Insta influencer. While it's easier to point fingers, we all make decisions--sometimes snap ones--about who we will care about and how we will keep what we feel is ours *ours*; whether that's status or our neighborhood or our bank balance.

It's quite a contrast, isn't it, the reaction of Herod compared to that of the magi? Herod was afraid; the wise ones rejoiced. Herod schemed and controlled; the wise ones risked following a star. Herod raged; the wise ones knelt. Just as power and authority can amplify fear and anger, so too they can amplify goodness, wonder, and mercy.

Because according to the Gospels, the power of Christ is vulnerable, subversive, life-giving, poured out again and again *love*. Jesus' life, from birth to resurrection, is all about seeking the lost, touching the unclean, seeing the invisible, and lifting up those who are pushed down. It's about second chances, spreading good news like scattering seeds and love for *all* people that ends up being so much stronger than hate, violence...and even death.

Using our imaginations, we might wonder: after experiencing the love of Jesus in Bethlehem again this Christmas, will we take the road that leads back to Herod, or will we travel another road?

Following the path of Christ doesn't lead us to places of power, glory, or selfishness. It leads us away from what *we* want and to places of service, to places and people in need of the love we have already received. The way of the child in the manger is a call to each one of us to take this 'other' road.

We don't have to travel thousands of miles to find Jesus. Christ's presence is with us wherever we are--and is in those around us who are rejoicing, worried, mourning, or demanding justice. With those whose hearts are broken, who have no hope, or no place warm to sleep.

Loving Jesus means loving others. That's a convergence--God's love and ours--shining with hope in the world.