

2019 01 06 – Following the Light

Matthew 2:1-12

We have some amazing Epiphany hymns that we sing at this time of year.

There are several in today's order of service, but you probably know other hymns or carols that tell the epiphany story. Let's see how many we can name. (*wait for response: We Three Kings, Star of the East, Arise Your Light is Come.*)

Today we have already sung two of my favourites: "I Am the Light of the World" by Jim Strathdee and "A Light is Gleaming" by Linnea Good." Two hymns with beautiful tunes and incredibly meaningful words. Both hymns focus on the image of light: God's light, the Christ light, or Jesus as "the light of the world."

But some the words that touch my heart in these hymns are those that speak of pain or sorrow, of darker times in our lives, times when the night seems endless. Linnea Good uses phrases like, "the darkest place," or "when night is round us and every shadow grows." Jim Strathdee gives us more specific descriptions of the darkness with words such as: "lost and lonely," "broken soul," "hungry children," and "prisoners in chains." As we sing those phrases, we remember the stories of darkness in our own lives and we feel again the pain of loss, of sickness, and betrayal.

We are surrounded by stories of pain and loss: storms in Thailand, train wrecks in Denmark, fatal accidents on Saskatchewan highways, over 30 lives lost in the collapse of a Russian apartment building, US government workers with no pay cheques and of course the ongoing wars in Yemen and Syria that have resulted

in hundreds of thousands of lives lost from both starvation and violence. Some of these are stories of natural disasters, some are accidents and some feature power-hungry men and women demonstrating their utter disdain for justice, freedom or the sanctity of life.

Today's scripture passage also features a powerful man filled with fear and creating havoc. Herod the Great was the ruler of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. He was a "client king" of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus and was put in place to do his bidding. When the astrologers from the east arrived in Jerusalem asking, "Where is the newborn ruler of the Jews?" Herod became greatly disturbed. The Jewish scholars in the city told him that their ancient texts had predicted that the new king, the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem. So Herod gave this information to the astrologers and asked that they return to Jerusalem to report their findings.

Later in the story, the astrologers are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and when Herod finds out he is furious. The gospel of Matthew tells us that "[Herod] gave orders to kill all male children that were two years old and younger living in and around Bethlehem. The age of the children was based on the date Herod had learned from the astrologers" (Matthew 2:16b). Herod was terrified of losing his power and as a result countless households in Judea experienced the excruciating pain of losing a child.

But today's story is about light. It is about a new star that the astrologers had noticed in the sky and then followed first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.

According to the story, the star came to “a standstill over the place where the child lay.” Astronomers and theologians have spent hundreds of years trying to figure out exactly what the astrologers might have seen. They’ve studied stars, comets, planets and other celestial bodies but none of them would have had the trajectory of this particular light in the sky.

Of course, that light has meaning well beyond any astronomer or astrologer’s scientific understanding. That light is connected to the light of all lights, the light of the world, to the very source of light, to the mystery that is the Ground of our Being. When the astrologers followed the light they found a child, a little boy, with Mary, his mother. They literally fell to the ground and lay in reverence before this toddler and then offered him expensive gifts of gold and scented oil. They believed that they were in the presence of royalty, the new king of the Jews. In fact, they were in the presence of Jesus, a child who would grow up to be a prophet, a healer, a teacher, a Rabbi, a martyr, a man so filled with the light of the Holy Spirit that people would call him divine.

The astrologers left their homes, their jobs, their families and they followed the light. How far are we willing to travel to follow that same light? In his Epiphany hymn, Jim Strathdee makes it clear that once the angels and the shepherds and the magi have done their job, then “the work of Christmas is begun.” He challenges us to follow the light, to follow the teachings of Jesus, to “follow and love” so that we can “learn the mystery of what [we] are meant to do and be.” How far are we willing to go to follow that light?

I want to share with you a story about a group of people who went all the way. There are so many stories of pain and loss in the world that I really appreciated reading a story of love and hope this week. I opened the latest United Church Observer and I couldn't stop reading the cover story about last summer's dramatic rescue of the White Helmets out of Syria.

In case you don't know, White Helmets is a volunteer organisation that operates in parts of rebel-controlled Syria. The majority of their activity in Syria consists of medical evacuation, search and rescue in response to bombing, evacuation of civilians from danger areas, and essential service delivery. As of April last year, they had saved over 114,000 lives and 204 White Helmet volunteers had lost their lives in the process. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Helmets_\(Syrian_Civil_War\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Helmets_(Syrian_Civil_War))

These are ordinary people who have taken on an extraordinary purpose. In the Observer article, Jihad Mahameed explained how he got involved, he said:

“Our neighbourhood was hit with bombs. A woman was crying. She was injured; couldn't find her baby. She was sure her baby was dead under the rubble.... We found the baby, covered in dust, sitting in a corner of the building looking like she didn't know what happened...It was my first rescue.” (United Church Observer Jan. 2019, pg. 31)

The White Helmets followed the light into places that had been bombed and gassed. They soon became heroes in Syria and in the world, but to Bashar al-Assad, their oppressor, they were the enemy. Not only did they keep people alive, they also “attached cameras to their white helmets to record chemical

attacks and barrel bombings, gathering evidence of war crimes. In retaliation... they were singled out, taken off buses, [and] put into regime detention facilities. They were tortured, terrorized and forced to make video confessions” (United Church Observer Jan. 2019, pg. 32)

By last June, it was obvious that the White Helmets needed to flee for their lives. The story of their evacuation is fascinating, but the most important piece to me is that it involved the cooperation of people from many political, religious and ethnic backgrounds. In just a few weeks, politicians, military personnel, and volunteer organizations from Canada, Israel, Jordan, Turkey and Syria came together to rescue over 400 White Helmets. They were Christian, Jewish, Muslim and probably atheist too, but they were all following that same light: the light of love, the light of compassion, the light that is God, our Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being. (United Church Observer Jan. 2019, pages 32-37)

We know that the light of love exists within each one of us. May we have the courage to follow it. May we, like the astrologers from the East, the White Helmets of Syria, and those who rescued them, have the faith to follow the light and learn the mystery of what we are meant to do and be.