

Matthew 2:1-12  
Isaiah 60:1-6

“Come to the Light”

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January 2, 2000

This week, I read an article with a story about a man who served in Sri Lanka during World War II. Their barracks were open at the sides, had thatched roofs and cement floors and were scattered throughout the jungle for security reasons. To get to the recreation area, the men had to cut through the jungle on a make-shift path. During the day this wasn't too bad but at night, the palm branches overhead formed a thick canopy, making it impossible for any light to filter through. If anyone blundered off the path, they would get tangled up in the vines, or fall in one of the many ditches.

There was one person, though, who seemed to be able to navigate the path successfully. One night, after a particularly unsuccessful trip, the man exploded at the one successful navigator. “How do you do it? Why don't you get lost the way I do?”

“Why its simple, mate,” the Australian replied. “Just look up.”

And sure enough, if they looked up, they could see past the tops of the tall palms to the stars shining in the black velvet sky. By looking at the gaps in the canopy, they could see the path repeated in the skies, pointing a way for them to follow. When they watched their feet, all they could see was blackness. But when they looked up, they were shown the way.

That's what the Magi did. They had to look up - to see the star that guided them to the Light of the world. That's what Isaiah called his people to do: “Lift up your eyes and look around. . .” (v.4) The light has come. “Arise, shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” (v.1).

To overstate the obvious, the new millenium has begun (at least it has if you take it that the year 2000 begins the new millenium and not 2001!). There are a lot of people looking for the light these days and the prognosticators have filled our ears and minds with predictions of what is to come. Optimists tell us one thing; doomsayers another. So-called experts tells us that this is what we need to succeed in the coming years; others tell us, “no, this is it.” Frankly I don't know and I don't spend too much time thinking on these things especially since most of the advice is simply how to achieve personal, material success or how to be happy without really thinking about the big picture or what's happening to the rest of the world.

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I do know, however, that anyone who wants to live a life whose measure is more than the bottom line or the accumulation of stuff or what kind of notoriety you get in the press, will have to look up because the only light shows us anything of lasting value and meaning is God. The true light comes from a hill-top town in Israel where a baby was born a long time ago.

Religious communities in general and the Church in particular are places where many people look for the Light. Isaiah was right: “Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.” It’s as true today as it was then: those of us who have seen the Light and live in the Light become a light to others by the way we live out our individual and communal lives.

This morning, I want to suggest that there are at least three things helpful to look at as people of faith which will allow us to let the light of the God of Jesus Christ shine through us in the year 2,000 and beyond. These three are matters of the Spirit, of faith, matters of the heart and matters of the way we orient ourselves towards our faith and life. But they have tremendous practical implications for how we live and believe. I offer these to you on this first Sunday of the new year, not necessarily for you to swallow whole right now, but as things to be thought on, chewed on, pondered, slowly in your heart and mind.

The first suggestion is to remember that God is big, more amazing and wonderful than we can imagine or dream of. About 50 years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a book called “Your God is Too Small”. In it, he writes that a lot of people cannot go deep into their own spiritual lives because their notions of God are too small. A small God, one we can control, one we can always get a handle on, figure out. We’ve boxed him in, says Phillips, into our way of thinking of God, forgetting that all the marvelous images of God in scripture and the Christian tradition are images, ways to help us relate to and understand a God who is ultimately beyond our understanding.

I confess that I have a habit of domesticating God, using images of God that are comfortable, images that I can package and fit into my own world. But God is wild, free, unpredictable and always moving towards the life and health of all creation. Think of it: the God of the Bible “roars like a lion”, is revealed in thunder and lightning, comes through earthquake, wind, fire and a still small voice. The Spirit of God, says Jesus, is like the wind; you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes.

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“Our God, heaven cannot hold him”,

says the wonderful poem, hymn, “In the Bleak Mid Winter”

“Nor the Earth sustain  
Heaven and earth shall flee away, When he comes to reign  
In the bleak mid-winter, a stable place suffice  
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.”

That’s what happened at Christmas. Who in their wildest imaginations could have believed that the amazing, powerful, wild, free, wonderful God would come to the world as a Child?

Take God out of your boxes and let his light shine through you.

Second suggestion. Move God to the center of our understanding of life and move we humans to our rightful place, as one of God’s marvelous, special creatures who live and move around God from whom comes our life and being. This has been a problem for us humans since the beginning of things human- at least since the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution 10,000 years ago. Think of the first humans, grasping for the fruit, “that they might become like one of us,” so says God in the story in Genesis. Or think of the Tower of Babel, building the tower to the sky to reach the heavens like the gods - or God. Think, for a moment about the traditional, or at least popular understanding of the Christian story that goes something like this:

“In the beginning of things, God created the heavens and the earth and everything else, then finally, gloriously, wonderfully, God made human beings, the climax of creation. Everything was made for the people, and the Earth is the stage on which the human drama of life and salvation is played out. And God said very good. But the humans weren’t so good and so God sent the Torah through Moses, then the prophets and priests and other to save the humans because that’s the purpose in life: the salvation of humans. But all these things failed. Then finally, when the time was ripe, Jesus came to save us and he lived and died and was raised from the dead to save us and now all people wait for his coming again to save us out of this evil world where there will be no more tears and the world will pass away and people will live forever.”

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Basically, that's the traditional Christian story, right?. People are the only part of the creation that ultimately matters. Everything revolves around our salvation. The present life is but a prelude to eternity. But tell me: Where is God in this story? Where's 98% of the rest of God's wonderful creation? Where's the cosmic Christ (Col.1:15ff) without which "not one thing came into being"? (John 1:3) That's it? Humans at the center of things with God and Christ on the periphery whose sole purpose is to pluck us out of the clutches of an evil world, the very world our good God created?

Ultimately whenever we move God away from the center of life and put ourselves in his rightful place, it fails. Whether its cloning Dolly or building weapons that can destroy the world God made or changing the Earth's climate through a lifestyle that demands we emit greenhouse gases or making decisions with only human wants or needs in mind, it always fails. And why does it fail? Because putting humans and human wants at the center of life is idolatry. It's making something other than the one true God the central guiding force and principle of life.

A fundamental truth of life and our faith, is that everything that exists - everything! - revolves around and lives in God, the Source, Sustainer, Redeemer and Savior of life. And for Christians, that means the living, risen Christ is at the center of life - all of it. Whenever we put something else in the center, no matter how noble or wonderful it may be, even if its people, eventually that life and orientation will collapse because it is idolatry and idolatry is a lie and it will not stand forever.

Put God back at the center of life and let his light shine through us.

One final suggestion: We need to save wild places. That may seem strange to you in light of my first two suggestions but I offer this, not only because rapidly shrinking habitats are the primary cause for the sixth great extinction episode in geological history that we are now going through, but for two reasons of the Spirit. First, because God delights in his creation - all of it. Read the response of God to Job out of the whirlwind beginning in the 38th chapter of that great book. It practically burst out in joy and delight as God asks Job where he was when God was creating everything. Or read the 104th Psalm and hear the joy the psalmist brings in listing so many marvels of life. Those who mockingly deride the "Save the Whale" crowd, are really mocking God:

“Yonder is the sea, great and wide,  
creeping thing innumerable are there,  
living things both small and great.  
There go the ships  
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.”  
(Psalm 104:25-26)

And those who laugh derisively at the trees huggers wanting to save ancient forests are really spitting at God: “For every wild animal in the forest is mine”, sings the Psalmist in Psalm 51. “. . . break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest and every tree in it,” so says Isaiah (44:23). God delights in his world - in his people and everything else he made and continues to make.

The second reason to save wild places is because it reminds us who we were created to be - not gods and goddesses, but people, beloved people, creatures of a loving Creator. Wild places humble us. Without a chainsaw or by slashing and burning or putting a road or ATV trail on every inch of the planet, we can recognize that we are not the most powerful beings on the planet - God is. Humility is one of the key aspects of our faith, though very much forgotten these days. Humility is modeled after the One who “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be grasped. But he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:5ff), so says the Apostle Paul. Wild places remind us whose world this is, who is at the center of life and what our rightful place is in God’s economy.

Save wild places, remember who we are, and let the light of God shine through.

Things to think about, and I pray that you will, with your head and your heart.

May the light of Christ’s presence shine through you in this new year and beyond.

Amen.