



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

Another Road

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 2, 2022

The First Sunday After Epiphany

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Let us pray.

*Radiant Morning Star,
you are both guidance and mystery.
Visit our rest with disturbing dreams,
and our journeys with strange companions.
Grace us with the hospitality
to open our hearts and homes
to visitors filled with unfamiliar wisdom
bearing profound and unusual gifts. Amen.¹*

On this second day of a brand new year, as we face yet another surge of this dreadful pandemic, I'm guessing that the last thing many of you want to do is to time-travel with me to the early days of March 2020. But forgive me as I lead us for just a few moments back to that time in which we were still figuring out what this thing called COVID-19 might mean. How little we knew then! How ill-prepared and ill-informed we were for what was to come!

I personally recall entering a subway car in that first week or two of March and scoffing at the people who were wearing masks over their faces. "These foolish people," I thought to myself. "Have they not listened to the CDC? Do they know that masks are not effective protection against this virus?" It might be comical to contemplate how much our understanding of COVID-19 has changed since those first days if it were not so tragic. Think of the lives that could have been saved if we had started to wear masks and practice social distancing earlier.

A few days before St. Bart's closed its doors and virtually the entire city shut down, I was attending a lunch with several other New York City clergy. The subject of discussion was the common cup of the Eucharist and how horrific it was that some bishops and other clergy had banned the consumption of communion wine in order to prevent the spread of disease. "Have these clerics not listened to the CDC?" we asked ourselves. "Have they not read the 1998 letter in which scientists pointed out that communion wine has not once been recorded as a vector for illness? For centuries in the past, communion wine was denied to the people in the pews, and now irrationally fearful leaders, blind to the scientific evidence, are daring to take it away again!"

¹ From *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers*, © 2002 Consultation on Common Texts.

By that Sunday, however, the point was moot. The people in the pews didn't have the opportunity to consume communion wine that Sunday because, for the most part, they weren't permitted even to attend church in person. The virus had gotten that bad. What previously had been pretty much inconceivable—closing the doors of a church building in order to prevent the spread of an illness—suddenly became essential. Our approach to keeping ourselves healthy and safe changed as the circumstances around us changed. When it finally seemed absolutely necessary, we found ourselves willing to do things differently, to travel by another road.

This morning's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew tells us that the Wise Men, or Magi, "having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod...left for their own country by another road." But the account in Matthew omits several key details. Was the dream mentioned by the Gospel one that all the Magi shared? Did each of the Magi simultaneously experience the exact same vision? Or did one of the Magi summarize his personal dream for the benefit of his companions? If so, why did the other Magi choose to alter their plans in order to accommodate the premonitions of one individual's subconscious? We human beings dream things all the time and then forget about them upon waking. Why should this one dream have been treated as especially determinative? And, as to the dream itself, just how clear was its message? How specific were its contents? What room for interpretation did the dream leave? Could the Magi really have been that certain that Herod was a danger?

I imagine that an intense discussion arose among the various Magi: at least one confident that another route was necessary and at least one skeptical that such a change in plans was warranted. After all, the journey to Bethlehem seemed perfectly safe the first time around. King Herod was a nice enough guy who said that he too wanted to worship the Christ Child. Herod actually helped the Magi get where they wanted to go. Why risk alienating him to appease a mere dream? For Magi unaware of Herod's true nature, a proposed shift in their return voyage from Bethlehem might have felt like a frivolous surrender to unfounded fears. I can almost hear their plea: don't let alarmism win.

Whatever debate did or did not happen, the Magi ultimately decided to obey the dream that at least one of them had by foregoing a second visit with Herod. As a result, the Magi may have saved the life of the infant Jesus and his earthly parents. Herod's murderous rage did not disappear—in fact, he killed all children under the age of two within Bethlehem in an effort to kill Jesus as well—but the Magi's refusal to see Herod again bought Jesus and his family time to escape. Having also received a warning about Herod in a dream, Joseph fled with Jesus and Mary to Egypt, where the three found safety for a time.

This past Friday, as part of my post-Christmas Netflix binge, I watched the apocalyptic satire called *Don't Look Up*. I would not recommend *Don't Look Up* to others as a lighthearted way to recuperate from a busy period at work. But it did raise some interesting and valuable questions about how we as human beings tend to respond to the dangers that threaten us. The movie centers on a PhD candidate who discovers that a comet will hit the earth in six months and in doing so potentially end life as we know it. The candidate, together with her academic advisor, briefs governmental authorities, including the President of the United States. Yet their warnings fall on deaf ears. The President, concerned about possible political blowback, chooses not to act quickly but instead to "sit tight and assess." Frustrated by the lack of response from the President, the two scientists take their claims to the media, which demonstrates far more interest in the vicissitudes of celebrity relationships than in an existential challenge to the human race. Some members of the general public, disbelieving reports of the doom to come, intentionally turn away from proof of the comet's impending arrival and encourage their friends and families to do the same. Over and over again, the scientists beg for human beings to travel by a different road, and, over and over again, humanity says no.

The director of *Don't Look Up*, Adam McKay, has said that the comet in his film is an analogy for climate change—an existential threat to the human race if there ever was one. But *Don't Look Up's* depiction of

humanity's response to potential danger is also reminiscent of how we as a society have handled the COVID-19 pandemic. I see resonances, too, with our approaches to social inequality, international conflict, and even the declining membership and influence of the Christian Church. When it comes to all of these situations, most of us know how serious our problems are. But, when we can get away with it, we prefer not to change. Masks are cumbersome; vaccines are scary; we like our air conditioning and our cheap goods and our cars. The status quo is a comfortable option for most people. When possible, we opt for proceeding with business as usual, for choosing the same routes that have never caused us difficulty in the past. Keep your heads down! We tell ourselves. Don't look up! There is absolutely nothing to see. Everything will be just fine.

But everything may not be fine. By keeping our heads down and refusing to look up, we abdicate our responsibility to one another and to ourselves. We can't afford to saunter down the same old path endlessly, to do things the way we've always done them forever. Herods lurk around the corner, prepared to deceive us, ready to violently lash out. When it comes to many of the problems our society now faces, our own health and safety are at risk. For the sake of the common good—indeed, in order to protect our very survival!—we must consider the possibility of doing something different, of traveling by another road.

Epiphanies, by their very nature, catch us off guard. They surprise and confound us, overwhelming us with new pieces of information that change the way we see the world. It is understandable that in the face of earth-shattering realizations we might want to take time to contemplate what is happening and formulate our response, to let the dust settle, to sit tight and assess. But the Magi did not wait for concrete evidence to confirm the vision they had witnessed. They stepped out in faith, trusting that a change was in order despite the lack of details they had been given, hoping that a new way made sense though they couldn't possibly know for sure if they were really doing what was right. By turning their backs on the path they knew best, they frustrated the aims of a tyrant. By choosing a different road, they saved the one who came to save us. May we all have such courage.

Amen.

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