

## The Pastor's Reflection

January 10, 2021 – First Sunday After the Epiphany

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, Ph.D. is available on our church website: [www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com). It is available in written (PDF) form from this page by clicking on the name. It is also available in audio form as part of a devotional service. There is a link to the audio version posted on the home page as well as at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 55:6-7  
Matthew 2:1-12

“Seek and you shall find.” (Matthew 7:7)

Let me begin by wishing you all a Happy New Year! This is the first Sunday of a brand-new year. It is a time of new beginnings. Out with the old and in with the new!

Most of us were very happy to bring this past year to a close. On New Year's Eve, we were saying goodbye to the year that has passed just as much as we were stepping forward into the new year. This past year was an unusual year. It was a challenging year. It was a difficult year. OK, it really was a terrible year—a tragic year for many. No matter what criteria we use to designate a year as an *annus horribilis*, this year not only meets; it surpasses the criteria.

If we frame this transition from the old to the new in a driving metaphor, we can say that we will be only too glad to view 2020 in the rearview mirror of the vehicle that carries us through life. This past Wednesday, I realized the problem with this metaphor. If you look carefully at the rearview mirror on the passenger side of your car, you may find the following warning inscribed in small letters along the bottom of the glass: “Warning! Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear!”

This is what happened to us this past Wednesday. The problems that we thought we were putting behind us as we turned the page into a new year, a new administration, a new *rapprochement*, the establishment or resumption of harmonious relations with those whose political views differ from ours, with those on the other side of the Great Political Divide, with those who, over the past few years have become our sworn enemies—these problems did not disappear. We did not leave them behind us. In fact, they are closer to us than we thought. In fact, they are right here in the car with us as we drive forward into the new year! Bummer!

Think of the various metaphors we use to frame the transition from the year that has passed to the year yet to come, from the old to the new. We think of it as closing the calendar on 2020 and opening up that brand-new calendar we received from Santa, a calendar with blank pages just waiting to be filled in with something different, something better. This past week we learned that those pristine blank pages are already being filled in, not with something better, but with more of the old. We know deep down that since we, both individually and collectively, fill in the pages of our lives, it will take a radical change *in us* to make the new year better than the old. It won't happen magically

or “by the grace of God,” nor does a ritual burning or shredding of our 2020 personal calendar ensure that what happened last year will not recur in 2021.

Last week we recalled the expectations that we held on New Year’s Eve a year ago, the expectations and the hopes that we brought to the year that has just passed. We remembered that since 2020 did not bring what we expected (it brought a decidedly unwelcome visitor), and that it certainly did not bring what we wanted, it only makes sense that this could happen again in 2021. The fundamental principle of change, of impermanence teaches us that we can’t hang onto the good and reject the bad, no matter how much we would like to do so. However, we can try to expect the unexpected, not only to steel ourselves against something as unforeseen and unsought as a pandemic, but also to remain open to some of the beautiful, loving experiences that will undoubtedly come our way as well.

This past week, our bright and hopeful expectations for the year to come were dashed on the rocks of despair. We saw the dark side of human nature, the dark side of the American psyche and the American people. This past week wasn’t different from others during the past year, the past four years, except as a matter of degree. It was a fundamental assault on democracy and the American way of life. It also cast a spotlight on the implicit racist/political bias of the police in the disparity between the way they allowed the violent assault on the Capital to take place, taking selfies with the rioters, as compared to teargassing and beating participants in peaceful Black Lives Matter demonstrations. To be sure, some people are only now beginning to see what many of us have seen all along, and that is a good thing. It was depressing, however, to realize that the new year has simply confronted us with more of the same.

One of the books I received from Santa this Christmas was Louise Penny’s most recent detective novel, *All the Devils are Here*. I am now an unabashed fan of Louise Penny, and intend to read more of the adventures of Detective Armand Gamache in the year to come. The title of Louise Penny’s book is taken from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, where the full quote is, “There are no devils in hell; all the devils are here.” For some reason, this quote came back to mind this past week!

We don’t have to look to hell to find devils; there are plenty who are walking the earth with us. The devils are with us and also within us. What happened this past year had nothing to do with our calendar; it had to do with us. To be sure, the coronavirus pandemic was not of our own doing, but the way we responded to it (or failed to respond to it for political reasons) left our government and many governments around the world with blood on their hands. As Erich Fromm points out in his masterpiece of social psychology *Escape From Freedom*, fascist leaders, dictators, totalitarian rulers only have the power that we give them. The problems in our society are our own doing. As Pogo has said, “We have met the enemy, and it is us.” How naïve to think that by turning the page in a calendar or by watching the ball descend in Times Square on New Year’s Eve, the coming year will be any different from the one(s) that have passed. We carry ourselves, both angels and devils, both individually and collectively, into the future.

If we want to make the future different from and better than the past, we need to change. However, the achievement of the change we seek is not as simple as making a New Year’s resolution. As we noted on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we experience the true joy of which the Bible speaks when the transcendent breaks into our life, when we have a healing encounter with the numinous. This is what happened to the shepherds

when they found themselves face to face with the angels; they had an epiphany, a revelation. This is what happened to the Magi as they followed the star that led them to the manger.

We need a change of consciousness. We need more honest, self-reflective insight into dynamics like our fear of freedom and its attendant responsibility, the fear that leads us to elevate political or cult leaders into god-like status through our unswerving belief that they and they alone can save us from “the Enemy,” from those who would undermine “our” way of life. We need more honest insight into our individual and systemic racism, the projection of our shadow onto certain groups of people. We need to confront our regressive retraction into tribalism, the fear (and condemnation) of those who, by virtue of their race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, or religion threaten us and threaten our vision of a white, patriarchal, heterosexual, nationalistic, and “Christian” society.

We need a change of consciousness, but we also need a change of heart. Just like Ebenezer Scrooge, just like the Grinch, whose heart unexpectedly grew several times bigger, we need to become more caring, more compassionate, more empathetic, more generous, and more loving. We need to discover or rediscover the profound truth that at the deepest level of this mysterious and precious life that we have been given, it’s all about love.

We need a change of consciousness; we need a change of heart; but we also need a change of vision. We need a new, more enlightened vision of what it means to be an American. We need to embrace an evolving vision, a bigger vision, a more inclusive vision of what it means to be a human being. We need a more enlightened understanding of life, this little planet that has been entrusted to us, and also ourselves.

Jesus calls us to embrace, to move forward into this radical change, this *metanoia*, this new, more enlightened way of living, this new, more compassionate way of being which he calls the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. What irony that the deadly assault on our democracy, the blatant power play to disenfranchise our citizens, to ignore and nullify the will of the people, should take place on the same day and overshadow the meaning and the message of Epiphany, the experiential realization of the transcendent dimension of our life and of all life!

The message of Epiphany, the legend of the star of Bethlehem, the visit of the Magi to the manger, the gifts they laid at the feet of the Christ child, is about the central role of seeking in our spiritual journey.

A few weeks ago, I saw a bumper sticker that read, “Wise Men Still Seek Him.” I like this bumper sticker because it doesn’t treat God as a possession that I have but others don’t have. I don’t relate to theological articulations that treat God or faith as a possession; I prefer to think of my faith, the quality of my relationship with God as a work in process.

The wise (both men and women) seek God, just as wise or enlightened people have sought God (in various forms) throughout history. The bumper sticker describes our Christian faith as a journey or a pilgrimage. It encourages us to think of our relationship with God as a process, as something that is always growing and evolving. It encourages us to think of our faith journey as a quest, like the quest of the Knights of the Round Table for the Holy Grail which had become lost to the church and the culture through the centuries.

Augustine tells us of the importance of seeking when he tells us that “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.” However, from our own personal experience, and perhaps especially from the experience of this past year, we know that there are times when we feel separate and separated from God. We may feel separated from God during a time of personal trial or tragedy, like the death of a loved one. We may feel separated from God when we encounter social problems that seem to be beyond our ability to solve. We get discouraged, depressed at what is happening to our country, to the world, to our environment. Most of us know the feeling of being separated or alienated from God, from our fellow human beings, and from the deepest core, the true center of ourselves.

At those times when we feel separated, alienated, and alone, the teachings of our religious tradition and all religious traditions encourage us to turn back to God. They remind us that whenever we make someone or something that is not God into God, we are creating a false idol, and that this idol, whether it is a person, our country, materialistic success, etc., will never be able to provide us with what we really need. We need to seek the true, the living God. We need to seek to reestablish our relationship with this God through utilizing the spiritual disciplines of our religious tradition, whatever it is. At times like these, when our faith is at a low ebb, we need to remember the promises of Jesus: that those who truly seek will find.

Many of the psalms tell us we should seek the Lord. Psalm 27, a psalm of devotion, tells us,

*One thing I asked of the Lord,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord,  
and to inquire in his temple. . . .  
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”  
Your face, Lord, do I seek.  
Do not hide your face from me.*

Jesus tells us time and again to seek the kingdom of God.

In the spiritual exercises developed five hundred years ago by Ignatius of Loyola, we are advised to set some time aside in the middle of every day and again when we go to bed to practice what was originally called the Examen of Conscience. The original purpose of this discipline was to set time aside every day to reflect upon our thoughts, our feelings, our words, and our behavior to become conscious of the ways that we failed to be the person that God calls us to be.

Since Vatican II, however, this discipline has come to be called the Examination of Consciousness. It is now seen as a time that is set aside every day to discern God’s presence in our lives, to see where God has encountered us in our daily activities. This practice has the goal of helping us become more conscious of God’s presence in our life. This practice comes very close to our understanding of epiphany.

This evolution of the understanding of the Ignatian spiritual exercises is an interesting development, because it witnesses to another fundamental truth about God. It challenges us to think about what it means to seek God when we can never be separated from God. It is not as if God is in some places and not others. It is not as if God is with us when we are good and separate from us when we are bad. As the apostle Paul reminds us, nothing can separate us from the love of God which was shown to us in Christ Jesus.

I believe we need to seek and we don't need to seek. Since we can never be separated from God, it doesn't make any sense to seek God. It would be like a fish setting out on a journey to seek the ocean. The ocean is all around the fish and also inside it. And yet, even though we can never be separated from God, we can be separated from an awareness of God's presence. This is what I like about the Ignatian exercises; they seek to help us become more conscious of God's presence in our daily life. The love of God for us is a reality which can never change. However, if we are not conscious of that love, we can live our life as if God were not. When we discover we are doing this, we need to turn around and "seek God's face." We need to enter once again into God's presence or into the kingdom or realm of God.

The legend of the Magi is a teaching about seeking. The Magi were probably Babylonian astrologers. Since the story has no parallel in any other first-century Christian writing, there is no way to determine whether it actually "happened" historically or whether Matthew used an ancient myth about seeking to tell us something important about our relationship with Christ.

The legend of the Magi tells us that the search for God involves a journey, for according to the scriptures, Jesus was not born in the town where the wise men lived. And yet, I think we could also say that the Christ was there as well. We are given a sign, just as the wise men were shown the star, but it is up to us whether we embark upon the journey. The story reminds us that the spiritual journey runs counter to common sense; the "practical people" see it as delusional or a waste of time. The legend of the Magi reminds us that the journey is beset by dangers--the regressive and power-dominated Herod-systems of the world and of our own psychologies. But the journey leads to discovery and to new life for all who embark upon it.

The wise still seek him. Seek and you will find. Follow the star. But beware, for when you find what you seek, you will never be the same again. You will be different. And life will also be different. Nothing is ever the same after the Event.

T. S. Eliot, in his poem, *Journey of the Magi*, humanizes the wise men and their search. Eliot also hints at how both the journey and the Event, the arrival of the Magi at the manger, changed them. When they return to their home country, they realize that they are not the same. This is what happens when we experience an epiphany, a revelation of the Divine, and the new insight, the new way of living that attends this powerful experience. Eliot's poem, which is full of Christian symbolism like "the three trees," "the wineskins," "vine leaves," "the white horse," and "dicing for pieces of silver," is narrated by one of the Magi, who tells us,

*'A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:*

*The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.*

*Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.*

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.*

This is what Epiphany is all about. It is a searching that is not a searching. It is a search for something that we already have, something that is already with us and within us, something that is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. It is the experience of a special birth, the kind of birth that is also a death, the death of the old world, the death of the old ways. It is the kind of death, as the wise man who is narrating the poem says, that we need to experience time and time again. As he puts it, "I should be glad of another death."

This revelation of the Divine, this experience of the numinous, is what we need to experience if we are to become if we are to be the change that we seek, the change that will rewrite the pages of our individual and collective calendars, our individual and collective journals, our individual and collective lives. This experience of the transcendent dimension of life that comes only through a spiritual birth and death and rebirth is the epiphany that we need if we are to make our country and our world more inclusive, more enlightened, more compassionate.

So perhaps it is really not ironic that the events of this past Wednesday took place on the Christian celebration of Epiphany. Perhaps it is synchronistic. Perhaps an individual and collective epiphany, a new insight, a new revelation of Truth, a new and more enlightened vision of America and the world is exactly what we need to make the coming year not only different from the past but incredibly better!

But we need to remember--it all begins with us.