

January 5, 2020

Matthew 2:7-15; 3:13-17

“20/20 Vision (2020 Star Word Selection)”

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### **Prayer after Scripture**

Ever-loving God, may your word speak to us in this time...from the word of Scripture... from the One to whom that star pointed that first epiphany, the living Word, Jesus the Christ – the One to whom we look for guidance in this new year...to that end, may the words of my mouth and the words of all our hearts be found pleasing and acceptable to you, O God, for you are our rock & our redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon**

W. H. Auden wrote a poem called “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio.”

He wrote it during the dark times of World War II.

The poem is about 1500 lines long. (For comparison: Shakespeare's Macbeth is about 2100 lines long.)

This poem, has been called “one of the most powerful expressions of the meaning of Christmas in the 20th century.”

As an enthusiastic reviewer wrote, “With its metaphysical musings and theological underpinnings, the poem will never replace "The Night Before Christmas" or the seasonal pageant at Radio City Music Hall. But Auden's is a Christmas that can glimpse redemption even in the trivialization of Christmas, in the frantic shopping, distracted gaiety and unsuccessful attempts, as he says, to love all of our relatives. This is a Christmas for the day after Christmas. This is a Christmas for grown-ups.”

Here is an excerpt,

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --  
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school. There are enough  
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --  
Not that we have much appetite, having [consumed] such a lot,

Once again, As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,  
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,  
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware

Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are, ...

A second enthusiastic reviewer has said, “[Auden's] concern in the poem is not simply to speak of the Nativity events but rather to draw out their incarnational impact upon the mundane world of the everyday. And what could be more boring, more deadeningly mundane, than the cabin-fever periods of February? Only a late-winter reading allows access to the deeper layers of meaning in the poem, because for Auden Christmas is ... an annual reminder that God has acted and is acting “to redeem from insignificance” the monotonous sludge of our everyday routines.”

A chorus movement in the piece, goes like this,

He is the Way.  
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.  
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And [~~at your marriage~~] all its occasions shall dance for joy.

Which brings us to today, Star Word Sunday...

Also, the day when we celebrate Epiphany – and remember what happened with the Magi, with Joseph, the Disciples and Jesus in our Matthew texts this morning.

- The magi had one thing in mind after encountering “the Word made flesh” they had a dream that taught them to go home by a different road because Herod had ill intent in his heart.
- Joseph having welcomed “the Word made flesh” into his family dreamt Egypt was the place to go to protect his family.
- The disciples who followed “the Word made flesh” – along with John the Baptizer and anyone else along that river bank – saw God’s Spirit descend like a dove and alight on Jesus (the Word made flesh” and heard a voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Thus, we see a bit clearer, that when one encounters and is guided by the Word made flesh – one discovers new ways of relating in this world.

This encounter prompts us to periodically ask questions like:

Do we keep on the road we’re on or do we make a mid-course correction?

Do we keep doing what we’re doing because “if it’s not broke why fix it?”

Do we walk with trepidation into the new year because of what the last year brought our way?  
Do we walk with anticipation into the new year because the way we see it *hope* will not disappoint?

Do we step into the new year recalling profound words of faith – that encourage us to take it one step, one moment, one day at a time because where we are right now is so tenuous that to proceed without some modicum of caution would not be prudent.

W.H. Auden puts it thus in his *Christmas Oratorio* – he writes about how [this star draws us to a place where] “knowledge but increases vertigo.”

Auden portrays three modern day wise men who proclaim in unison about their encounter with this star, “to discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star.”

Some 2000 years later we still follow the same star – why?

What do we need to learn this New Year about our life and our faith?

What do we need to learn about our humanity as we follow the divine?

What do we need to receive from God so that we might grow?

***In preparation, I offer the following caution:***

This word is merely a word written in ink on a piece of paper – there is nothing magical or miraculous about this word – this word is not gospel for your life in the sense that it needs to be adhered to without derivation or discernment – although it could be gospel in the sense that it might be a bit of good news which you need to hear.

Secondly, this word is not necessarily something you **have** to do – it isn’t meant to induce guilt by adding one more thing to an already full plate – it might be liberating in that it reminds you of something you need to *receive*. It may simply mean to sit in God’s presence with this word and contemplate this word until its message becomes clear.

Finally, this word might not mean the same thing as the year unfolds. Sometimes the word doesn’t even make sense until we’ve lived well into the New Year. Sometimes we lose the word – find the word – lose the word then find it again... The point being, these words provide a starting point for reflecting on faith and in so doing these words will open us to seeing when and where we might encounter the living God in our day-to-day.

***The process is simple:***

Ushers will pass a basket of words to you and you will reach in (shuffle around) – no peaking – and choose a word then pass the basket on.

When the stars are passed we’ll close with a few words then a prayer.

Ready?

Okay, I invite the ushers to come forward for us to choose our 2020 Star Word.

*[play music during star gift selection]*

**After 2020 Star Words Have Been Selected**

Consider how this word might be a gift from God.

Consider this word to be a chance to stop long enough to receive something from God.

Consider how this word speaks to you right now as 2020 begins...

Consider how this word speaks to you in a few months....

Consider how this word speaks to you after having traversed half-way then  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through the year....

Is it something you need to receive? To offer? To ponder?

Does the word mean the same at the end of the year as it did in the beginning of the year?

What kind of vision does this word cast for your 2020...wait and see.

**Let us pray:**

Ever-loving God, be with us in this new year and be with us as we listen for how this word speaks to us throughout this year...to that end, may the words on our cards and the words of our mouths and the words of all our hearts be found pleasing and acceptable to you, O God, for you are our rock & our redeemer. Amen.