

Christmas 2C Matthew 2:1-12 Jeremiah 31:7-14 Psalm 84:1-8
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a`

I suppose it is the accumulation of Christmases past all built up
and brewing in our hearts that makes the simplest moment in this
season seem rich and laden with meaning.

A gathering of family or friends reveals some uncommon goodness.

A bare branch etched across the starlit moonlit sky somehow
speaks more poignantly than normally.

A tiny child in a mother's arms turning over in the sleep, still and
quiet, seems full of meaning.

And we look out and see so many things and wonder whether
when they pass us by in our normal ordinary life - whether we miss
something in them, that now perhaps we catch a glimpse of.

And yet it is hard to fathom the meaning of it all, this life of ours.

The deep weave of the tapestry is hard for us to make out.

After all we can also look out and see that in Chicago where I just was there were 499 homicide deaths in 2015 and many thousands of people injured by gunshot wounds.

What is the pattern in it all, in this life of ours? What order, what truth, what meaning is hidden?

The ancient Greek Heraclitus insisted that the deep meaning of all things was change and strife. War he said was the real logic of all things. Force and necessity was the logic, the meaning of things. Everything succumbs to necessity, the powerful do what they like and the weak do what they must. That's the way the world works, he thought.

Our forebears, the ancient Israelites, thought there was another meaning, another order hidden in the rich tapestry of creation and they wondered and struggled to discern it and make it out and live in harmony with it.

So Jeremiah speaks of God as the great consoler bringing the blind and lame, those with child and yet in labor, back from scattered exile, weeping as they come, back with singing and shouting, back to the rich bounty of the Lord, so that they are once again radiant and find their life become like a watered garden, filled by the
divine generosity.

And the witness of Psalm 84 that we sang as our Gradual today is that deepest in the hearts of the people is not the will to power and force but the longing of heart and soul for the Living God just as the swallow desires a nest to lay her young. “My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God,” he cries out.

As if in the very being of every creature there is the echo of the divine intent and goodness that desires the attention and love of all
God has created.

And not only this, thought our ancient forebears, God's tender word also becomes present to us as law, giving us a hint and a clue about how to be with each other in ways that are full of goodness and kindness, justice and honesty, and generally in such a way as to make ourselves livable with each other.

And it is that conviction that we are the inheritors of. That the fundament bond, the hidden logic of life, the meaning of all things is not strife and necessity or violence, that that is not the last word or life's deepest truth, but that this goodness and ever-living fullness of God's benevolence, mysteriously unfurling in every rock and plant and mountain, in every child and every struggle for justice, in every yearning human life, is God's truth and meaning.

Hard for us to grasp and trust in, we struggle, we receive God's word as love and justice and we try to live into it and so embody

something of that word in our lives and our culture and our society, and often we fail.

I came across a wonderful journal entry from the great naturalist

John Muir, writing in his journal is August 1873.

He says: “God never shouts or spouts or speaks incoherently. The rocks and sublime canyons, waters and winds, all life structures, animal meadows and groves, and all the silver stars are word of God, and they flow sweet and ripe from God’s lips.”

That’s the conviction we have inherited, and in this season of Christmastide we receive this great gift in new and unforeseen ways. And it makes us wonder about life’s meaning all over again.

How can we know what hidden wondering, even longing drew these wise men in our gospel today to observe the star and then

not with fright like Herod, but with maybe a deep longing, to set
out on their uncertain journey?

Could it be that they knew intuitively that what they had found in
life so far was not all there was to be found, that the deepest
structure and meaning of life they had yet to discover?

I think that this pondering of meaning was made more poignant
for me this year as once again many of us were present for the
Christmas Eve children's pageant and found ourselves with them
drawn into the wonder of the story as the children one after
another embodied the vast cast that was assembled before us as the
holy story was told.

There were the principle characters; Mary, Joseph, the Holy Child,
the Inn Keeper and of course the speaking Angel.

And then also the supporting cast...more angels'...animals of many
sorts...and certainly the shepherds...and then the wise men.

All brought before us in the form of artful and playful two-dimensional figures made by our children's ministers and children, placed before us here on the chancel floor and stairs for our delight and wonder.

Watching those children and looking at the photos taken I began to picture the typical way our Godly Play ministers prayerfully wonder with our children, and how that moment did not so much have to do with the way they thought about the holy story as much as about what it might feel like.

Feel like to be a sheep, what sheep life must have been like, or what it might be like to be a shepherd, or an attending angel on that momentous night.

Wow, how cool to be an angel and fly around looking at the world from above or to suddenly be summoned to make an important announcement to a young girl that would change life her forever. I wonder what that would be like!

Each child sensing that something really special is happening and
what it must have felt like to be a part of it as their teachers
prayerfully imagined with them.

What special thing do I yearn and hope for today or might yet
tomorrow, and what if I could be that or do that?

To let it turn around in their minds and hearts.

And possibly they would have talked about this young girl Mary,
and how she was hearing a call to be something very special and
wondering about that.

Maybe there is something I want to be.

Maybe there is something I long to become.

Let's talk about what that might be and be like.

What do you think you might hear as you are growing up that
would make you so full of excitement, so yearning for something
that you don't quite know as yet what it is.

Something maybe you are not aware of at this moment

but can sense what that might be like.

The children would not be memorizing some scripted text for repetition but that the words of this holy story would gradually over some moments together with their ministers, through wonder and imagination, become part of them.

So that when they heard those words, “Behold I bring you glad tidings,” the words were not on a page or even their teacher’s words, but were somehow theirs, inside the children, embodied.

So just possibly like those wise men we honor today, the children found themselves, not on camels, but carrying the characters and persons of the holy story forward

and being drawn with a kind of wise yearning toward Mary and Joseph and the Christ-child, right up here in their very own church!

And I am of course holding up this year's children's pageant to draw out the significance of this great feast we celebrate with our own wonder each year.

Because that is what our forebears and early followers of Jesus began to realize I believe.

That this great yearning that we all feel for what is right and good and true and beautiful, this passionate desire we have to grow and become is oriented toward something great and wonderful, and we all yearn for it, and if we are open to it and haven't given up on it, we will receive the meaning of what that yearning is destined to bring and become.

Jeremiah saw it, because he says there will be a great gathering of the scattered from the farthest parts of the earth by the very hand of God and who will be kept as a shepherd keeps a flock.

That they will have grain and wine and oil...every provision...their life be like a garden...their mourning turned to joy and

gladness...that they shall shine with radiance as they experience the
goodness of the Lord!

You will be called by a new name, Isaiah said last Sunday, the name
that you really have it in you to become, and that the world needs
you to be.

That is what we celebrate at this season, the hidden wisdom and
ordering of God, not just at the ground of every creature, calling it
into existence, and not only at the base of the human struggle for
justice for a good society, but a Word that becomes real to us as a
deep and dearest friend, a compassionate neighbor who walks
beside us and kindles within us something of his own passion to
embody and to be the truth God longs to bring to birth in our
world.

As today's collect says the dignity of our human nature,
wonderfully created, more wonderfully restored.

So this Christmastide may we ask for the Spirit to work within us, to enlighten the eyes of our hearts, to bring to life in us that deep yearning and passionate desire to discover what we might be, so that so that when Christ, God's word, God's love made flesh, accosts us and meets us, we might recognize and receive what he gives and in him grow up into that fullness of truth that God has always known and longed for us to be.

Amen.