

Sermon: Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2021 – Matthew 2: 1-12
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Journey with me, 12 months back, to the time that 2019 was ending and 2020 just beginning. With the teens rolling into the twenties, there were a number of recaps, remembering back to 2010, and the things that had changed over a decade, and many we looked forward to a year of potential clarity, the year 2020 as a time of 20/20 vision. Admittedly there was awareness of a recently reported, highly infectious form of coronavirus elsewhere in the world, but the mood, as I recall it, was optimistic.

Now, one year later, I'm going to run an unscientific and unverifiable poll: hands up, everyone hoping that 2021 is just like 2020? OK, I expect that there are a couple of hands half-way up, as there were good things that happened this year: there are folks whose diseases were cured in 2020; there were long-invisible racial and economic injustices that came into public view in 2020 leading to increased accountability and the beginnings of change; there were instances of people and businesses embracing care-of-neighbour in new ways; some of us had expanded households for a while; in Church life, there was a new urgency to embrace technological advances that had been tugging on our sleeves for a decade or more, and new connections forged with Church friends in other parts of Canada and other parts of the world; and there were babies born - and we celebrate every child born in these past 12 months. But on the whole, for me at least, this was a clunker of a year, and I beg your indulgence as I roll through a sample of internet memes that somewhat encapsulate the year 2020. [see list of memes after Bibliography...or images at end of PDF]

At the threshold of exiting 2020 and entering 2021, the word “epiphany” greets us. With a capital E, Epiphany is the Christian festival when many ‘western’ Churches celebrate the revealing of the Christ child to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi. With a small e, epiphany is defined by the Collins dictionary as “a moment of sudden insight or understanding.”

Small-e epiphany, then, is a moment of dawning. To be amidst this type of epiphany is to perceive things in a new way – either being confronted by something brand new or, often, experiencing something familiar in a significantly different manner than you did before. Wouldn't it be marvellous, if the year 2021 was a year defined by new insights and deep understanding? What if the year 2021 was the year when we embraced the epiphanies of 2020, and truly applied the things we learned this past year, personally and communally, as foundations of a new way of being? Could 2021 be a year when the extra challenges faced daily by people identifying as BiPOC – Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour – come to be truly believed by the majority, resulting in changes in attitude and action and legislation and societal structure? Within that, could this be a year when the 94 calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission become more broadly known and more deeply embraced? Could this be a year when the needs of the planet, which seemed to be making such gains early in 2020, finds a new primacy as industries find healthier, ecologically sustainable ways of being as they re-start their activities? Could this be a year when the attention of our communities and our faith communities turns more and more outward, picking up on the wonderful movement of “care-mongering” that was so much in evidence here in the Bow Valley and elsewhere? Could 2021 be a year when the immediate judgmentalism and division

that drives so many threads in social media, gets replaced by reason, and consideration, and speaking the truth in love? While offered rhetorically, I hope the answer to all these will be YES in the hearts of individuals and institutions and nations. Our eyes and ears and hearts have been opened in the difficult days of 2020, and 2021 can afford us the opportunity for those glimpses of light to become full-on illumination of the path ahead. Let us welcome the spirit of small-e epiphanies, and view 2021 as a year of hopefulness, not just because there are new vaccines on the horizon, but because these other possibilities invite us ever forward.

The Capital E Epiphany, framed through the story of the Magi, also has something to say in these early days of 2021. The time when Jesus was born – and the time a couple of generations later, when the gospel of Matthew was written – were trying times for the people of Judah. On one side of them were the Romans making sure they understood their subservient place in society, on the other side it was the megalomania of your own King, Herod. Into those colluding systems of power-mongering and external domination, God proclaimed, through a humble birth, that political power is fleeting, while the power of love supports, liberates and endures. The holiness of all life, and God's direct participation in the lives of even the most challenged, was demonstrated as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and within us. At capital E Epiphany, God's gift of transformative, justice-seeking love called out, not only to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, but to visitors from afar. In the Magi, people from elsewhere, of other religious traditions and other ethnicities, are brought near to this child to confirm their inclinations toward love. Many Nativity sets in recent centuries have portrayed the Magi as a multi-national, multi-ethnic group, which expresses a reality of early Christianity: it took very little time for the gospel to take root in places like Kerala province in India, Sudan and Ethiopia. At Capital E Epiphany, the star of Bethlehem, the dawning of a new day and a new era for all the earth, come together in the story of the Christ-light shining for and within and between and beyond. And this capital-E Epiphany came complete with God's intention for safety: the Magi who had been guided by a Star to come to Bethlehem, were guided by a dream to go home by a route that did not involve a return trip to King Herod.

I am purposely writing this sermon on December 31, 2020, to speak in present-tense, of this threshold, between 2020 and 2021. No matter what it has taught me, I am glad to say goodbye to 2020. Our province has been diminished, by the death of 500 Albertans in the first 261 days of the pandemic and 500 more deaths in only 34 days – a great loss for all, a huge loss for those directly impacted by the death of a loved one. And yet, even as I prepare to rip my 2020 calendars off the wall, E/epiphany is present: the small-e promise that a new day is bursting forth, informed by the difficult leanings of 2020, and the capital-E insistence of God's ever-present love to make itself known in every heart, to the benefit of this planet and all who dwell therein. In his Christmas Eve sermon this year, my colleague Rev. Ray Goodship, of St. Andrew's United Church in Cochrane, AB, said this: "For 2000 years, into the darkness and the cold, into the loss and the grief in times of war and famine, the Christ is born. For 2000 years, into our comfortable and happy lives, into our joy and hope, into whatever our truth and situation is, the Christ, is born. Nothing stops his coming. The Word is always entering into the flesh: this flesh, the mundane world. The light of the world is always entering into the night, pushing back the dark."

And so, in these days of limited daylight and cold, dark nights... these days of transition from 2020 to 2021... these days of welcoming once more, God's love incarnate – in Bethlehem, in the hearts of the Magi, in you, in me, in all people and institutions and nations who weave selfless love into their lives... these days of new ideas, new learnings, clarity of thought, brighter days ahead... we celebrate the power of E/epiphany, and step into the days of its dawning. Amen.

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References consulted/cited:

Bond, Sarah and Junior, Nyasha. <https://hyperallergic.com/535881/the-story-of-the-black-king-among-the-magi/>

Collins COBUILD dictionary. Cited at <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/epiphany>

Fletcher, Robson. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-covid-19-december-deadliest-year-end-1.5856674>

Goodship, Ray. Christmas Eve service of St. Andrew's United Church, Cochrane AB, December 24, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHstK5Wm-4s&feature=youtu.be> starting at 39:56

Rukuni, Rugare. "Parthian-India and Aksum: A geographical case for pre-Ezana early Christianity in Ethiopia" http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222020000400018

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action. http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

And the following memes:

Avocado: https://images-cdn.9gag.com/photo/aWxO7Xq_700b.jpg

Chips: <https://memezila.com/wp-content/If-2020-was-a-bag-of-chips-Lays-Toothpaste-and-orange-juice-meme-3355.png>

Fingers on Chalkboard: <https://media.makeameme.org/created/if-2020-were-8aec7bfa0a.jpg>

Lemonade : https://static.boredpanda.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/if-2020-was-meme-joke-2-5fbba803c8b39_700.jpg

Pinata: <https://i0.wp.com/www.bitsandpieces.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/If-2020-was-a-pinata....jpg?resize=600%2C444&ssl=1>

Slide: <https://www.shutupandtakemymoney.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/if-2020-was-a-slide-meme.jpg>

If 2020 was an avocado

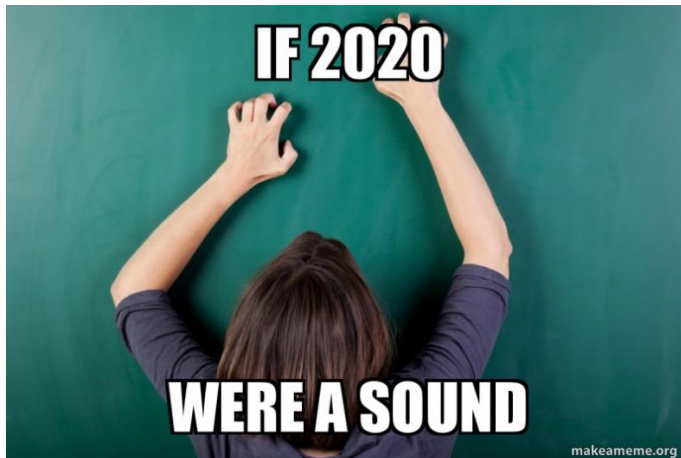


IF 2020 WAS A BAG OF CHIPS



"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!"

2020 lemons:



If 2020 was a slide...

