

Epiphany - 2021

Another Road

I want to start this morning by taking a short poll. First: How many of you still have your Christmas Tree up? Second: What do you have on the top of your Christmas tree, a star or an angel? How many of you have stars on top of your tree? How many of you have angels?

The reason I asked the first question is: Christmas, from the Christian perspective isn't truly over until January 6th or Epiphany, the day we traditionally celebrate the visit by the Wise Men. The reason I asked the second question is: I think there are two types of people. Some are star people and some are angel people.

Biblically, the Angel represents those who had been waiting for the Messiah, for a sign from God, for a long time, like the Shepherds. They knew what the Angel meant when he told them about a Savior, a Messiah. They remembered the old prophecies. They remembered with anticipation.

And the Star was for those who were still searching, those still unsure, those still with questions, those on a quest to find out about this mystery and message from God wrapped up in human flesh and swaddling clothes.

A friend reminded me that God sent both the Angel and the Star because God always meets us where we are.

Grace

During a British conference on comparative religions, religion scholars from various religious faith traditions around the world came together for a debate. They debated what belief, if any, was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis ambled into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

After some discussion, the conferees all agreed. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist Eight-Fold Path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish Covenant, and the Muslim Five Pillars of Faith and law code, each of these offers a way to earn divine approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love a gift, given without regard to whether it has been sufficiently earned; given without regard to whether the recipient has measured up or not.

Perhaps the reason that we resist grace is that we want to deserve what we get; and we want everybody else to get what they deserve. We want God to owe us. We want a system that says, "If I do this, I get that." We want a system that guarantees that God will have to deliver according to our desires. In short, we want a system that makes God conform to our will, rather

than transform us to his will. Such systems allow us to feel righteous in our own actions, free to nurture resentments. They let us feel more deserving than others whom we can degrade freely through our malicious talk, and condone our unforgiveness of wrong-doers, especially those who have wronged us.

Aware of our inbuilt resistance to grace, Jesus talks about it throughout the Gospels. He describes a world suffused with God's grace: where the sun shines on people good and bad alike; where birds gather seeds gratis, neither growing nor harvesting to earn them; where untended wildflowers burst into bloom on the rocky hillsides; where forgiveness, Heaven and God's presence are given for no more than the faith it takes to ask for them.

Grace is God's gift to us through the shed blood of our Lord. We can't earn it or deserve it. We can't manipulate God with it, nor can we be proud of ourselves above others through it. We can only humbly receive it. *(The Very Reverend Dr. Richard (Rick) Miles)*

When You Follow a Star and Find a Stable

Think of the disappointment these men must have experienced who through the night had traveled many miles by camel to discover that the star had come to rest over a stable. They had followed a star and found a stable. Surely they were expecting a palace or perhaps a stately mansion. Think how they must have felt. Their vast disappointment as they look down from some nearby Judean hill and came to the realization that their destination was a stable.

Following stars and finding stables is a common occurrence in human experience. Who among us has not at some time in our life fixed our gaze on some high and lofty star only to find it leads to a stable.

Hundreds of examples could be given. A young man graduates from high school full of great dreams and expectations about the future only to wake up one day and discover himself enmeshed in the very drudgery that he had promised himself he would avoid.

A man comes to retirement age. He thinks of all the good things he's going to be able to do. After a few weeks, however, he begins to discover that retirement is not exactly what he thought it would be. The day starts growing longer. The hours become more oppressive.

All of us at some time in our life follow a star only to discover a stable. The problem is how to turn that stable into a moment of salvation. What is it that enables wise men of every age to turn the stables of life into victory?

1. For one thing, they look for God in the stable
2. For another, they offer their best to God
3. And finally, because of what happens in the stable, they mark a new direction for their life.