

Sermon Notes for Sunday January 6, 2013
Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House

Am I?
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Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-9
Matthew: 2:1-12

If you could go back to a time in your life, when might it be?

And if you were to go back, would it be:

- to remain there?
- to change something then so things might be different now?
- to say something you wish you had said –
- or take back something you were sorry you spoke, maybe in anger?

We often look back to think about where we have been, where we are now, and where it is we would like to be – for ourselves, our families, or other associations. Reflection is a good thing,

getting stuck in the past – well, that can become a dark and isolated place, a place that separates from us from reality,

defined as being real.

I think that the ancients – those from thousands of years ago had less of a problem with “reality” than we did.

They did not separate things the way we do – “everything” was real and what was real was “everything.”

This was not a matter of enlightenment, necessarily. In their own way they were “enlightened.” To them, the physical, spiritual, mystical, psychic and cosmos were all one. In each was the other.

The fullness of creation was in a grain of sand, something that quantum physics and string theories are reinforcing even today, thousands of years later.

There is though a difference between intuitively knowing that the universe exists fully in the smallest of particles and practically applying the source, meaning, and nature of say – an eclipse of the sun or the super nova of an exploding star. Intuition can go only so far, sometimes.

Still, eclipses or supernovae whether in ancient or modern times do elicit or provoke a response from us, responses that gives insight into how we parse or interpret the world, the cosmos, the spiritual, psychic, or mystical.

And, even today – the way we see things are as much based on our experiences, expectations, and longings as they are in any hard scientific data, which truth be told – most of us grasp very little of. Pick up an article from almost any scientific journal and see if you can get through it all without a bit of a struggle. Most of the time, I am left in the dust—literally, experiential dust from the past that clings to my sandals as does dust from a previous journey.

So today, when we read Isaiah we are reading about a people who lived way in the past, somewhere between the 800's through 500's before the Common Era – or 2500-2800 years ago.

Isaiah is made up several authors and at least three sections: Proto-Isaiah (Chapters 1-39); Deutero-Isaiah (Chapters 40 – 55), and Trito-Isaiah (Chapters 56-66) written sometime after the end of the Exile and the return to Jerusalem. It is from Trito-Isaiah that our reading comes this morning and the poet who wrote this, perhaps one in a line of students that followed Isaiah, this poet is looking back to the promises of early creation and evidence in their day – not forward to the Birth of a Messiah.

In Isaiah, the great light that arises is the sun rising over the New Jerusalem, the one to which they have just returned after exile. It is the same light that burned on the mountain in the Sinai that gave Moses the commandments and led the Hebrew nation from the desert. It is a look backwards by the poet to the promises that God made in the Covenant of the past with the Hebrew nation – a promise the poet now saw as coming true.

And it is such a remarkable time that all those from that ancient world of the 6th Century BCE would be attracted and drawn to this great and marvelous City of God, like fans to Woodstak! Everyone from the tribe of camel Bedouins in Median; to the Queen of Sheba who would return as she once did during the time of Solomon; to the Assyrian flocks associated with the Ashurbanipal and the cities of Kedar and Nebaioth – in other words, Jerusalem would be, again and as never before, the center of the universe to which all would be drawn.

- The New Jerusalem.
- The gleaming city on the hill.
- The City of God.

This was the vision of the poet. These were his or her times. And as the poet used the writings and stories that preceded his or her times to create this narrative, so too did the evangelists and other writers who would follow centuries later.

They would see a different prophecy in the writing of Isaiah, a vision that effectively “skipped” over the present moments in which Isaiah was written – to its being a

foretelling of what was to be delivered to this world, universe, and cosmos in Jesus the Christ.

The *real* prophecy had finally been fulfilled, finally. In other words, Isaiah was only a pointer...the best was yet to come.

Still is there that much difference in the way the evangelists looked back to understand the nature of Jesus, wrapping the prophecy with the present, the reality as a sum of all parts of creation – elevating Jesus in ways that stars followed him, Magi came from the East, and a king murdered a generation of infants to protect his reign?

It is only in Matthew that the Magi are mentioned – and not numbered, by the way. We somehow just came to think there were three. In those days, Magi generally traveled in groups of 12. Why three? Why just Melchior, Caspar, Balthazar? Perhaps because there were just three gifts? Was it part of some other legend or story? No one. And I mean, no one, is quite sure.

And notice how casually astrology is referred to in this writing of Matthew. It is a science that has often been condemned by religions. But here, the use of and reference to astrologers seems as common and accepted as referring to shepherd in field where they lay.

But the parallels of looking back to see the present, the coming of those from the East and the West and the North and the South, the gifts, the change in the astrology, the interpretation of dreams and promises...it is easy to see how ancient writings of Isaiah and others were used to elevate events surrounding the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. To the evangelists, writing these gospels well after Jesus died, and for Matthew somewhere around the end of the First Century CE – it is important to remember the “whole” purpose of the gospel, not just pick it apart for its “facts.”

Still, are we 2,000 years later stuck in the narratives that reveal less and less of their historical and scientific assurance, but are afraid that to make adjustments in our day to better understand the past so we can move forward? Are we holding our breath for confirmation – suspending everything else so as to remain faithful? Is that faith or is it fear of shaking our faith up a bit?

Is it fear that holds us back – and if so, is that fear grown so great that it now has taken the message of Christmas and molded it into a quaint fairy-tale from the past and a modern juggernaut of commercialism and near idolatrous worship of mythical events and pagan symbols (such as the “Christmas Tree.”)

And, what happens to *reality*?

The *reality* that God is in all events, present in all ways, always has been from Moses to Jesus and more, and that strictly “packaging” Jesus forces more and more of us to embrace Jesus in our lives differently, helping us to reflect on our past, and asking for his

help in moving forward – trying not to listen to the voices that rise up in protest on *knowing Jesus in an ongoing revelatory way*, being accused of not being faithful or adherents of the faith unless we accept everything as is, as it is written, as told, and as was thousands of years and more ago and will be evermore.

The Epiphany, the visit of the Magi is the day that celebrates the revelation of God the Son as a human being in Jesus Christ. It is the day that the Magi (and Herod) according to Matthew recognized this baby as King. The manifestation of God in the world in Jesus the Christ. We look back to this time and we are appropriately awed.

But as I said in the beginning of these comments, sometimes we look back to see where we have been, where we are, and where it is we hope to go – or at least how “to be” on the way to wherever it is we are going.

Both of these readings look back (even as they were written they were written about the past within the present) and among the many lessons of these readings are ways of reflection, consideration, and action.

Just as the poet in Isaiah or Matthew looked back to reflect on what was at hand, both laid down the ground work for going forward – they each had dreams and hopes and aspirations based on what was and would be –

neither seemed to be ready to settle for as things were, actually neither seemed to want things to stay the same

– rather, they saw these great changes as epiphanies, events that were to change their lives and the course of their reality, which included but was not limited to their history or science – or even politics. It was cosmic.

So the question for me, for us -- maybe for you, this morning is have we lost our cosmic?

- What is our epiphany?
- What are we ready to do differently as the result of the birth of this child Jesus and his teachings, life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

Not what are we going to just believe – but what are we going to do connecting:

- Belief, and science, and physical, and cosmos, and mystical and more based on Jesus’ presence in our lives.
- How will we parse Jesus from this or from that
- – or will we see him and God and Spirit in everything
- – every word, every act, every decision, every joy, every sorrow?

In each of the cases of this morning’s readings, the epiphanies referred to were hugely altering. They were not just about tithing or attendance – but hugely altering in ways that they were open to; they saw dreams and did not try to control the outcome, rather they were in awe of the possibilities

After all, there was no way they could know what was to come in post-exilic Israel or in the post-Easter world of Jesus. They just lived into it – with everything they had.

Do we live into this epiphany with everything we have? What do we hold back? Do we know what it is and how to let it go and turn it over to God?

Are we ready to break from the security of what once was; packaged and defined nicely; keeping our sights in reverse to a time or place we would like to return and try to recreate idols of the past – or are we ready to do the hard and difficult work of being faithful in new times of change with a response to the future

with a life and a church that calls us out of our comfort,
away from our safety,
and into to faithful continuation of an Advent Season that always is,
of an Epiphany that needs to be always in our hearts,
and a world view that sees everything as the Presence of God –
and has meaning...

These are challenges for us all. Here, at Jan Hus, there are still strong feelings for the “glory days” when this was a hub of larger membership and grander dreams; a time that followed a different glory days of the early immigrant Czech community that filled this church and city – a time still lamented as being gone and still hoped for in some way to return.”

This church is no longer neither of those times, or the times in between, for those times have passed for us and everyone.

Germantown is gone.

The Polo Grounds are gone.

Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia are gone.

The real work here is hard word, but that does not mean that it is neither joyful nor faithful. It does mean that we need to look back, see where we are, and move forward – not try to capture what once was – for if we do, we will where we are and what we are becoming and faith is all about becoming.

When Moses asked God what God’s name was, God answered, “I Am.” God didn’t say “I Was” or “I Might Be.” Or “I Am Over Here...Over There

God said, “I Am.”

Perhaps the question for this Epiphany is “Am I?”

“Am I here? Am I Present? Am I Free of the Past? Am I All In? Am I willing?

Am I?

