

**Sermon: Love Requires a Star****Scripture: Matthew 2****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 7, 2024**

---

As I was sitting down to write this sermon for Epiphany Sunday, I opened my email and received a quote for the day from a blog that I subscribe to which said: “What gives me hope is that life unfailingly responds to the advances of love.” (Nipun Mehta) I like the quote and believe it’s true that reality is designed in love by a loving Creator and so life is responsive necessarily to the presence and movement of love.

But since I was sitting down to work with this particular passage that closes the Christmas story and the 12 days of Christmas, I heard the quote differently, that yes life has an unending response to the advances of love, but sometimes those responses are aggressive even violent ones to SHUT IT DOWN. It would be great if when we chose love, always and only good things resulted and better outcomes were assured but it’s not so simple or black and white and our scriptures testify to this fact.

What I love about the Christmas story is that it toggles back and forth from the amazingly mystical magical and fanciful to the brutally realistic – a virgin receives a visitation from an angel and it creates a scandal which threatens to shame her husband. Choirs of heavenly hosts singing in the skies to shepherds and Herod connives to kill the thing they are singing about. A star guides wise men from the East and the holy family desperately becomes refugees to escape state sponsored violence. The mystical, magical and shining right along-side the terrible, fearful, and grim.

Jesus' story itself is both, from his birth through his public ministry, his execution, and his life beyond, it's the story of embodied love that is at once beautiful and mystical, changing lives and transforming worlds and it's a love that initiates profound resistance and evil in fact. So the quote of the day - "What gives me hope is that life unfailingly responds to the advances of love..." - could equally be stated "What concerns me is how life unfailingly responds to the advances of love."

The embodiment of love comes among us, Emmanuel, God with Us and before we are even out of the first 2 chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, the virgin mother's song of wonder and joy screeches to a halt like a needle across an LP and becomes ash in the mouths of mothers who wail in Rama for their children who are no more. And you really can't read that passage here in 2024 without hearing the loud wailing and the silent screams of mothers in that same region right now weeping for their children who are no more.

All the beauty, majesty and divine supremacy that shows up on that silent and holy night of Christmas very quickly seems to withdraw back into the shadows in the face of the immediate violent backlash from Herod. Why the return to obscurity and shadows and subtly, God, after such a showing at Christmas? Even the mystery and miracle of Jesus' life, death and resurrection has a certain tenuity in how localized and specific in impact it was. Why must evil and violence seem to take back the day again and again?

Herod unleashes his legions and brutalizes the world back into his control while the wise men *think* they see a star that they *guess* will lead them to *somewhere* important to *someone* worthy of worship, but it's a guess, at best, an estimation. Turns out they had it right, but it seems so lopsided that Herod had all

the resources for power, control and dominance at his fingertips to set himself up as god and God Godself is a baby held in the arms of a girl, who soon must flee. It makes little sense, that this is how the Power of the Universe comes, like this under the subtle sign of a star.

But ok, when it comes to speaking of the nature and character of God, please, give me something that I can't quite wrap my head around rather than a neatly packaged rational explanation that is so tightly constructed I can weaponize it against those who disagree. Doesn't it only make sense that if God decided to manifest, embody Godself in human form in this world that the way it would happen would stun, baffle, our human minds? And it's not just that it baffles us in this enlightened scientific age, it baffled minds from day one and led people to dismiss it all as so much bunk from the beginning. But of course.

Across human history, power and dominance in this world requires force and overcoming of the other to rule – even in the best case scenario of human governance in a democracy it's the majority overcoming the minority by force of vote, isn't it? Just recently we saw the violence inherent to some extent in even this best case scenario as the minority in our country felt like they should storm the halls of power to take by force what they believed was being taken from them by force. And more of that conflict and more of that violence is likely coming in this new year, wouldn't you guess?

All the while, each year, we say God has come. God has been born among us. A star brought wise men from the east. And God gathered disciples and taught among us and loved among us and challenged our all-too human ways. And we amassed our power against God and killed Him, though we couldn't keep him

dead and this is how God chooses to be at work in the world SO much more subtle than the way human power and dominance work.

Human power storms a capital. Human power cuts through fences and slaughters innocent concert goers. Human power drops bombs on neighborhoods of noncombatants. Human power sets the other up as enemy, as nonhuman, as vermin, to more easily eliminate them. Human power marshals technology to make weapons more deadly and efficient.

And all the while divine power places a star in the general direction of a baby in hopes that there might be some who think to follow it.

It seems that love only requires a star.

And it doesn't even require us to follow it. We are invited, called, to follow.

No wonder it has taken 2000 years for life to respond to the advances of love.

In this new year of 2024 in what ways will you follow the star that is the subtle presence of Jesus Christ, Love Incarnate, shining there above the world, beneath the world, at the heart of the world beckoning followers,

“Come, follow me and bring your hearts along....”