

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

January 3, 2021

II Christmas, Matthew 2:1-12

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Stacked in a pyramid of colorful cans, the emergency supply promises 30,144 servings of “long-lasting, freeze dried and dehydrated foods, enough to sustain four people for one year in any circumstance!” In the Costco coupon book, an exclamation point punctuates this last claim – “in any circumstance!” – as though my worst apocalyptic imagination will be conquered *enthusiastically!* by this palate of waterless vittles, promised to arrive “black-wrapped for privacy and security” ... all for only \$3,999.00.

Now, when one drops four-grand on such an investment, does the privacy wrapping intend to protect one from shame and ridicule, or does it imply that the investor assumes her neighbors secretly monitor her deliveries, waiting in the hedges to swipe just such an invaluable arrival?

Whichever may be true, be sure that Costco did not pioneer apocalyptic profiteering. Among the legions anticipating a Kirkland Signature-branded doomsday, syndicated psychic Jeane Dixon predicted the world would end in 2020. Dixon, who penned your newspaper horoscope for a half-century, wrote in 1971 that “Armageddon will come in 2020, when the False Prophet, Satan, and the Antichrist will rise up and battle man himself.”ⁱ

Bidding a bruised and weary farewell to this long year now finally passed, we muster only a hollow chuckle at such an oracle. Cloaking ourselves in the discarded privacy wrap from our emergency food supply, we nibble our fingernails and make associations between her vague divination and our beleaguered experience. *Maybe she was right*, we worriedly whisper. We sort through a tentative Google search to see what else her crystal ball – and I mean that literally: Dixon used a crystal ball – might have foretold.

Mathematicians and statisticians refer to this proof-texting as “The Jeane Dixon Effect:” selectively retrofitting events into a prophecy and then prioritizing a few “correct” predictions while ignoring the rafts of misses. And though our rational mind understands that this is not how probability works – no matter if that coin has landed heads a hundred times in a row, the next flip has the same 50/50 odds for tails as all those before it – yet some other part of us chooses to privilege the sensational anecdotes before the statistics ... whether those exceptions forebode or forgive the science ... whether they anticipate, in their turn, a bleaker or brighter future.ⁱⁱ

While Dixon did not assign a particular date to her 2020 apocalypse (she was much too savvy for such specificity!), most end-time predictions tend during fall in these last two weeks, which always include the winter solstice, that shortest day and longest night of the year. At “midwinter,” of course, the pattern of increasingly shorter days reverses: the days lengthen, and the *nights* shorten, for the first time since “midsummer.” After the longest night, light begins its victory over darkness – however long, however slowly, the cosmos itself stakes a theological claim about existence: we move from night into day; from cold into warmth; or, in the language of our prayers, from “death *into life*.”

Christendom’s location of Jesus’ birth within this seasonal octave is, likewise, neither accident nor coincidence, for in the Incarnation, *God’s* victory over darkness begins again. For those who choose to enliven God’s hopes, then, *the very tilt of the earth comes to tell the story of salvation*: come what will, come what may at midwinter, for us Christians, Christ is continually conceived and born, named and visited – God made incarnate and made manifest, for us and for all.

Yet, this good news is not good for everyone. In this morning’s appointment from Matthew, the Christmas tale frightens Herod. The puppet king’s unrelenting need to protect his political power leaves him so frail that even the birth of a nobody child foments his chaotic, irrational fears. He retreats to his bunker, renews his echo chamber, stirs his sycophants into a furor to match his own, and sends the Magi to hunt down the child. Following today’s Gospel passage when the Magi return home, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, warning the young father to flee from Herod, to take his family into Egypt, and to stay there until Herod’s death.

The Holy Family follows these instructions, and, when Herod learns the Magi have secretly betrayed him, he orders the murder of all male children under the age of two. So powerful is Herod’s apocalyptic anxiety that he draws the whole city of Jerusalem into it: his citizenry become willing accomplices in the mass murder of their own children. And while the academy debates the historicity of these events, the Church remembers those who die in the story as the first Christian martyrs, honoring their lives with another mark on the calendar – the Feast of the Holy Innocents – commemorated on December 28.

Opposing Herod’s fear, Jesus’ birth inspires the Magi’s great joy – the Magi, these first Gentile believers in the Christ. Notably, the Matthean text does not identify the “wise men” as royalty. That tradition, formed by the conflation of Matthew’s story with Psalm 72 and its promise that the “kings of Arabia and Saba will bring gifts” and “fall down before [the Messiah],”ⁱⁱⁱ does not become a common devotion until the Sixth Century, when the Venerable Bede even assigns names to each member of the triumvirate.^{iv} On this point, Matthew does not even number the wise men. Rather, Bede builds on the tradition designating their number according to the catalogued gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

See, the force of these stories does not depend upon their historicity, but upon the trajectories they set: one aligned with fear and power, aimed inevitably toward darkness and death, and the other with hope and humility, carrying us into light and life. And while we want to see ourselves as exclusively on a pilgrimage to that higher plane, recognize that we necessarily remain as much citizens of Herod's kingdom as of God's, for we still seek control of our own circumstances, still fear our own end, still hoard our own rations.

Therefore, we must daily choose our course, eschewing soothsayers and choosing the Christian hope, setting ourselves along the trajectory of the Magi by *refusing* the Jeane Dixon Effect and any understanding of Christian tradition as crystal ball. Our faith promises no particular future, and, yet, by our faithful living we will inaugurate one future or another:

. while the pandemic's waves of disease, despair, and dismissal continually crash, *we choose* "The Incarnation," following Advent's pregnant weeks with the arrival of the babe in a manger.

. While the world fêtes New Year's Day with its good riddance to the pandemic year now passed, *we choose* "The Circumcision of Jesus," recalling when Mary and Joseph named their child in the traditional Temple ceremony, six days after his birth.

. and this upcoming Wednesday, January 6, while Congress certifies the presidential election results, *we choose* "The Epiphany," celebrating with the Magi the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Of course, we have responsibilities in Herod's world – to move the body politic more in align with God's hopes and visions for it – and these commemorations do not imply we plug our ears and shield our eyes from secular existence.^v Rather, these devotions express and inaugurate the trajectory we have claimed for ourselves. This choice, then, to worship at this altar, rather than before a Sunday-morning news program, actively refutes Herod's apocalyptic narratives! And however long, however slowly, we participate in the victory of light, over darkness ... we mark time immemorial as the possession of our God ... and in claiming the story of the cosmos as the story of salvation, we trust in God's generosity, celebrate God's love, and find joy in the blessings of this life.

On this trajectory and in this spirit we welcome 2021.

I pray in the name of Immanuel,
the God who is with us, always;
Amen.

ⁱ Dixon, Jeane. *The Call to Glory*, as quoted in several year-end articles noting her 2020 prediction.

ⁱⁱ As people who claim and live within a story, we Christians tend to privilege anecdotes before statistics – often to *faithful* effect. However, we must be wary when this devotion tempts us to push all our chips on red after the wheel has rolled black several times in a row, believing that God has somehow exempted us from time, space, and statistical probabilities.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 72:10-11.

^{iv} Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

^v Even when we vest this bunkering in righteousness, such a retreat more resembles that of Herod, Jeane Dixon, and those of their fear-mongering, apocalyptic ilk, than the life and teachings of Jesus, for self-preservation comes to define our existence.