

Sermon for Epiphany, January 2, 2022

Do you find that your mood colours your memory? That is, the way you are feeling now, makes a difference to the things you remember? I sat down on Friday to draft our Christmas letter that we send out every year, usually well into January, so I'm early this year. And I was trying to remember the past year. But I was feeling kind of down because our services had been cancelled and my son Daniel and his girlfriend didn't come and the great family gatherings learning how to play Dungeons and Dragons didn't happen and I couldn't socialize with anyone else and instead I had caught up on a lot of household things I'd been putting off. Boring. So I was feeling kind of down.

And as I looked back on the year, all I could remember was the lockdowns and the times when we were all feeling so anxious and worried about Covid and other bad things that happened. And of course, that just reinforced my mood and made me feel worse. Have you ever done that? I find I do it all the time, when I'm down. I tend to forget the good stuff and just remember the bad stuff.

But I was idly scrolling through Facebook yesterday and I found a friend's post. She said that, in spite of everything, 2021 had been a good year for her. And she told us about all the good things that had happened in the year. And of course, that got me thinking, and I also went through my datebook to see what had happened, because it does sometimes all become a blur.

So when I was feeling badly, I remembered about all the Covid problems and lockdowns, but when I looked, we were only locked down for 2 months last year and most of the time restrictions were pretty light and life was nearly normal.

I remembered that at the beginning of the year, a mob of violent protesters stormed the US Capitol and it looked like democracy might be violently overthrown there. But that didn't happen, of course, and a new President was inaugurated a couple weeks later and American news has been much tamer ever since.

I remembered the sadness when we first found the bodies of children in unmarked graves at the sites of old Indian Residential Schools in May. This rocked the whole country. We realised in a new and concrete way that the things we had been told for decades about the treatment of Indigenous people were true. A lot of people were so ashamed that they didn't even celebrate Canada Day. That was a difficult time, but it had a good side. We had to come face to face with our past (which had already happened) and we have started to take some responsibility for it instead of hoping it would stay buried. There is hope that this might lead to some much needed changes in relations with Indigenous peoples.

I could go on, but I won't. I expect you can think of some things from the last year that are more hopeful than we first thought, or that have a good side when you actually look at them more closely.

On a personal note, I started this year with my Mom waiting for results from her lumpectomy and discovering she needed a full mastectomy. It was a nerve-wracking time and she was slow to recover. But she has recovered and her doctor said she probably wouldn't have any further problems. Now that's good news.

Our dear old kitty, Jessie, died in July of old age. She was 17. Shortly before she died, she managed to kill a rat. I don't know how. She was sitting on the patio sunning herself. She was pretty much completely deaf and arthritic. I figure it must have run across her paws, really slowly, but she did get it and brought it in. Her swan song. She died shortly after. We were really sad for a while, but now we have two kittens, Simon and Jeremy, and they bring us such joy. While wreaking havoc in our house.

And although we didn't see Daniel this Christmas, we had a great visit with him and the other kids this summer in our newly renovated cottage. Come to think of it, the very fact that we have a cottage and have a good time with our family when we gather is cause for much gratitude.

Life this year has been good, in spite of Covid and the very real problems it brought. There have been many times of quiet contentment, times of joyful reunions, times of simple gratitude for all that is so good in our lives. And there is so much, isn't there? As a rule, I never tell people to count their blessings, because I know that when people tell me that, I don't like it. Usually what they mean is to stop complaining. But every now and then, I do look back and count my blessings, contemplate the things I'm so grateful for. And there are so many of them.

Reading my friend's Facebook post completely flipped my mood. I realised it had been a good year, in so many ways. And yes, it is disappointing and worrying that we are again locked down, and yes, that is likely to affect our mental and emotional health, as it has before. And we need to be aware of that. And we need to take steps to stay well. I've never been much given to Pollyanna views of the world where everything is completely rosy. We need to see the problems that are out there and we need to do what we can to make those things better. But we don't need to kind of wallow in them, which I am somewhat prone to do when I'm feeling down. And we shouldn't lose sight of the good stuff just because there are also problems.

That got me thinking about Mary and Joseph. That young couple had quite a few problems. Early on, Mary had accepted a call from God to be the mother of the Messiah and it had caused some problems with Joseph. That got smoothed out. Then the Emperor decided they needed to go back to their home towns to register, so they're walking about 90 miles while Mary is 9 months pregnant and their child is born in a barn. Rough shepherds come crowding in shortly afterwards, which I expect was a bit scary at first. A bit later these strange, rich Gentile Magi show up, bearing gifts. Oh, and a hint that they've messed up and Herod is now likely to be after the young family. So they flee to Egypt. I can just imagine them asking themselves, "What next? It's just one thing after another." But of course, in the midst of all that, they had Jesus, their baby and the world's Saviour.

Life is like that, isn't it? Good and bad woven together. Here come the Magi with rich gifts, so that they shouldn't have to worry about money ever again. But they also roused Herod's wrath, so Mary and Joseph have to flee. The Magi brought the trouble on them, inadvertently, but also its solution, because they could afford to flee to Egypt.

So often our lives are like that. Bad things happen, then good things happen. Sometimes it's hard to tell which is which. Because so often things have a good side and a bad side. Like this lockdown, which we all hate. But it has kept our numbers from skyrocketing. The technology that has caused us so much stress but which is now keeping us together during this lockdown. Families, where we so often find our biggest problems and our biggest support and love. Life is so full of bad and good, difficult and easy, that it's hard to say what was a good time or a bad time, a good year or a bad year.

You know I really like the daily word from the Brothers of St. John the Evangelist. One of them a couple days ago, from Br. Curtis Almquist, really stood out for me. He said this:

You have been given the light and life and love of Jesus to transform your own darkness and the darkness of the world in which you live. In your touch, your words, your presence, you have been given power by Jesus. God Emmanuel is with you. Jesus abides with you. That's his promise, always, even to the end of the world.

Which is like what my friend said, "2022 will be a good year because we have the power to make it a good year." So what I've come around to, is thinking that in the darkness that I so often see around me and within me, my job is to shine Jesus' light. I don't have to make that light. It's God's light and given to me freely. I don't have to do anything much. I just have to open the shutters of my soul and let it shine out. It just does that. And by that light, I can see light and I can see the potential for more light.

What this means in practical terms is that when I see someone hurting, I can be kind to them, maybe listen to them. When I see someone hungry, I can feed them. When I see injustice, I can speak out. I can treat other people kindly and considerately. I can show compassion. When someone is rude to me, I can forgive them and be kind back.

In this way, we are doing our bit to bring more light to a world that is already full of light but still has shadows as well. We are doing our bit to bring more love to a world that is already full of love, but still has anger and fear and hatred and wounded people as well. We are doing our bit to bring more joy and more peace to a world that has plenty of it, but could use a bit more.

Epiphany is about shining light. That's what Epiphany means. Shining out. At Epiphany, the light of Jesus shined on the Gentile Magi, just as it had shined on the Jewish shepherds. We are all included. God's light just does shine, like the sun, without making any distinctions about who deserves it or doesn't. And on this feast of Epiphany, we are reminded that we, too, are to shine light, Jesus' light, on everyone we meet.

This will mean that at the end of the day, anyone we ran across will be happier because they met us. Their lives will be a bit better because we were part of their day. At the end of the day, we have the power to make this a good day or a good year for ourselves and those around us. And the more we do this, the more we will be able to do it. The more we practice, the brighter our light will get. Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Happy New Year!