Montague Pastoral Charge

January 4, 2025 – Epiphany Sunday

Sermon

Which way is north? 10 points to the first person who can tell me. Do you find that easy? Some people have an innate sense of direction, others not so much. I find my own sense of direction is generally pretty good, although when I first moved to Toronto I used to take a compass around with me to get my bearings. When you'd get out of the subway at night time and you couldn't tell which side of which street you had come out on, it was very helpful to be able to find north quickly. My compass and I used to get some strange looks on the street, but I learned not to care. Hospitals are the worst: so many little jogs and turns in hallways that all look the same. But even at home or at church, you can go a lifetime without ever thinking about which direction you are facing.

The magi in today's Gospel reading are the quintessential *oriented* people. They are literally from the Orient – from the east. But they are also oriented towards their goal: to find the newborn King of the Jews. Literally the word "orient" means "rising," and so it came to mean the direction where the sun rises, which is to say, the east. It's the same in Greek: the word for east is the same word for the sun's rising. When you think of it, it's strange that when talk about getting our bearings, we use the word "orienting." Literally we are "easting" ourselves. It might seem more natural to talk about "northing" ourselves, because if you are lost and you pull out your compass, the needle will point to the north, not to the east. But no, if you have your bearings it's because you know which way is east – which way the sunrise is going to come. The wise men are literally coming from the orient, from the direction of the sun, but their orientation is westward, to the land of the Jews. Their compass points neither north nor east, but straight to wherever the Christ-child lies sleeping; he is their direction and their orientation on their journey, wherever he is.

What is our orientation, I wonder? Do we know what direction we are going in? Do we have an orientation at all? These days, if someone asks you "What's your orientation," they're probably talking about sexual orientation. And even though that's not what we're talking about here, it's a good way to use the word, because it describes the posture of your life: are you oriented towards the opposite sex or to the same sex? What direction is your life opening towards? Which way does your inner compass point you? That's one of the most basic things about you, that particular sense of intimate directionality towards other people.

If that's sexual orientation, what about spiritual orientation? Where do our souls point? Do they also point, like the wise men's, to Bethelehem? Is the King of the Jews the deepest desire of our hearts, the thing we are questing after? Or is he just a sideline on a journey of life which is directed fundamentally at something else – happiness, success, or some other goal? That can be a hard question to answer. Where do our lives point towards? To put it another way, if you were to sit down and write your memoirs, would the story of your life have a plot? Would you step back, look at the shape of your life and say, "Oh yes, it was all heading in this particular direction – that's what I was aiming at." Or would it just be a bunch of episodes and anecdotes, placed side by side?

Life can be terribly disorienting. It can seem just like a hodgepodge of disjointed episodes, tacked together. You may think you're heading in a particular direction, but then something changes, and then, like when you have to follow a detour sign in an unfamiliar city, you suddenly don't know where you are anymore. It's a common metaphor to think of our life as a journey from east to west, just like the sun. We rise in the dawn of life when we are children. Then we grow stronger and higher, and in the noontime of our young adulthood we are in our prime. Then our light gradually dwindles in the afternoon of middle age and the evening of our later days, as we get older and less active. Old age is when we go to "Sunset Villa" or something like that, until our journey is done and we go down with the sun in the western horizon. We are heading in a great arc from east to west.

Now that may be the direction of the natural life, but that's not the direction of the Christian life. As Christians, we are an oriented people, and that means literally *oriented*, directed to the east. *Oriens* means the dayspring or the sunrise, and it's one of the ancient names for Christ. That's where we're going. The journey of our lives is towards the dawn: we should think of it not as going from sunrise to sunset but from sunset to sunrise. Our compass always points east.

I was doing a funeral recently and the person in charge of the pallbearers had to stop to ask me which way east was. Because Christian cemeteries generally face east. The idea is that, when Christ comes, he will come with the dawn, and the dead will rise up to meet him face to face. Jewish cemeteries tend to do something similar, they tend to be positioned so that, if you were dead and you woke up, you could stand up and find yourself facing the entrance to the cemetery, so you could just walk on out. You don't waste time, you go straight for the exit. Like it says in Malachi, "you shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall."

In Orthodox Christian homes, they will hang their icons – the pictures of Jesus and the saints – always on an east wall, so that you're facing the sunrise when you pray through them. And it's an ancient tradition for church buildings to be positioned so that the congregation faces east. You'll find that Anglican churches nearly always face east, as do lots of Catholic churches and even plenty of United churches. It's also traditional to have the baptismal font at the *west* end of the church, right by the front door. That's also part of the symbolism. Because baptism is the doorway into the church. It's the start of our journey from west to east, and it's there at the west end, with our baptism, where we go through our spiritual death and rebirth. As Paul says in Romans, "We were buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." In other words, life in the church does not go from dawn to dusk, it goes the opposite way, from dusk to dawn, death to resurrection, west to east. We are travellers into the source of light, not away from it. As our physical life is getting older and declining like the sunset, our spirits are travelling eastward, into the sunrise.

Our orientation is towards the dawn – and that dawn is Christ. The magi journey from east to west physically, but spiritually they are going from east to even east-er (pun intended!). They have seen a new star at its rising, and they are going to what has caused it. It just so happens that the source of this new light is not in the eastern sky but on a western land. So that, in the person of these wise men, it's as if the compass is changing: the Orient itself is re-orienting itself towards the one who himself is the *Oriens*, the rising light that enlightens all people.

And as with them, so with us. They may be strange and mysterious, but the magi are the pattern for our spiritual pilgrimage. Not just because they are the first Gentiles in the story, but because their experience of orientation is so much like ours. The initial illumination, the wondering, the excitement, the decision to set out on a new road. And then, we can only imagine, the struggles, the setbacks, the distractions, the rough terrain, the losses, the fatigue, the cloudy nights when no star can be seen, the doubt, the questioning, the disorientation, the reorientation, and the determination to press on.

Orientation towards God is no easy solution to the troubles of life's journey. But the hardest part is this: the wise men don't have a vision of the king they are searching for. They wouldn't know him if they met him in their soup (as my grandmother would say). They don't get a set of directions from the angels as to where to find him, the way the shepherds do. What orients them is nothing on earth. It's not as if there is a flashing neon sign on the stable door saying "This way to the Saviour!" Even if there were, they wouldn't be able to see it over field and fountain, moor and mountain. No, what orients them is the star above. In other words, what guides them is not a vision of Jesus himself but a *sign* of him. This third thing, far above. That's very important. Not Jesus himself, nor even an awareness of where to find him, but something else – a signal that points to him.

And that's how it is for us. Rarely do we see a vision of Christ to orient us; what orients us in this life is generally signs and signals, and that has to be good enough – it *is* good enough. It may be bells or incense, it may be icons on the wall, it will certainly include the words of scripture, it may be the beauty of creation. It may be other people around us showing daily faithfulness and love – people who live and speak in such a way that they point to Christ. Those people play the star for us. When Christmas is past and we can't see Jesus at all or hear his voice, it's all these indirect signs and stars that will guide us. If we expect to have all the intimate awareness of Mary as she physically touches Jesus, we will probably be disappointed. But look up at the stars and the signs, and you'll find what you need.

Because the stars don't go away. The wise men have to face life after Christmas, the journey back east by another road. Certainly they have been changed by what they experienced in Bethlehem, but the new road east will probably be no easier than the old road west. In fact, it will probably be harder, or they would have taken it in the first place. But even though they have to turn away from Mary and Joseph and Jesus, the star will still be there. A star, once born, takes a very long time to pass away. Even though Christmas is past, the sign is still there to orient them on the next phase of their pilgrimage. And just so, Jesus never leaves us without signs to orient us, no matter what hardship or uncertainty we are facing.

In this new year, try to make a special point of attending to whatever star or stars you have been given. However faint, however run-of-the-mill they may seem, pay attention to those signs. Jesus is present in his signs. He is the eastern dawn, and he is also in the compass pointing eastward. Try to notice those signs in the world around you, and orient yourself towards them. If it helps, try bringing some physical signs into your home: a cross, an icon, some music, a special place to pray in the morning or evening. Most of us don't plan our homes so that we're sitting on the chesterfield facing east, but you can still fill your home with reminders of where it is oriented. What would it be like if everything we did – not just our prayers but also brushing our teeth, cooking dinner, reading in bed – what if everything we did could be oriented towards Jesus? If all our spaces and all our times were directed towards him and his calling? It would be

wonderful to have a direct vision of God to orient us, but we can't count on that. What we can count on is the stars; there will always be signs for us in people and places – signs that he is born, that he suffers with us, signs that he has died, and that he is alive again. Find them and follow them.