

Finding our place in uncertainty

Matthew 12:1-20, 2 Jan 2022, Kandis Douglas

It is lovely to be back at St Peter's today, the first Sunday in 2022. Epiphany Sunday – the time of revelation – when gentiles, wise men seeking the new King.

I hope you were able to enjoy Christmas, meeting and celebrating with family and friends. While my daughter and I were able to remain covid free sadly my son caught covid and was rather poorly over the Christmas period. So, like many, our Christmas was not what we had expected or planned.

And now the new year has arrived and as we look forward, no doubt wondering what 2022 will bring, any plans – any expectations are held lightly as the shadow of the pandemic continues to leave us all with uncertainty about what tomorrow brings – let alone the next month.

As Christians how do we hold this uncertainty and still journey with Christ? What structures might we create to help us recognise where we are and where we might be going? What revelations can provide insights.

The Christmas story, which draws to a close this weekend with Epiphany and the celebration of the Magi, offers three locations to map the tentative nature of our current situation.

The first location in Bethlehem. The place of Jesus birth. The location foretold by Micah the prophet **'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'** This least important city in Judah became a place of danger. When Herod learned from the Magi that a new king had been born and when the religious leaders named Bethlehem – Herod had every male child under the age of two killed. Bethlehem represented a place of danger. Suddenly the place of obscurity became a place of terror. That is what happened at the beginning of the pandemic, places of tranquillity became places of danger.

The new year poses each one of us a question, where might the places of danger come from this year? Will it be something predictable like the pandemic or disease, will it be from an accident or our own mistakes or misfortune. Might it be from the careless or malicious actions of another?

The second location is Egypt. **'After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother'** When Bethlehem became a place of danger Joseph took his wife and child and escaped out of Herod's jurisdiction, escaped to the land of Egypt. Egypt represented a place of escape. Over the last two years most of us have longed to escape. We remember the long awaited little escapes we found in December 2020 and then greater escape over the summer months as the immunisation programme grew. Some escapes are good ones. The opportunity to relax, play, engage in adventure can be important and creative kinds of renewal. Other escapes, like that of Mary and Joseph, are vital to staying alive and staying sane.

Again, each one of us may ask ourselves, where might the places of escape be in 2022? I have started to schedule minibreaks every couple of months – to escape the continuous pressure which work and life in pandemic creates. What are you planning and what do those periods of escape represent? Is it a place of desperate preservation? Anxious denial or healthy renewal? But we should also ask ourselves, what are we escaping from?

Then Joseph had another dream while he was in Egypt which led him back to Nazareth. **'When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. "Get up!" the angel said. "Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead'** So, Nazareth became the family home, where Mary and Joseph had other children and it was the place where Jesus grew-up. Formed and shaped by his experiences, no doubt trained as a carpenter by his father. Nazareth is the third location on Mary and Joseph's journey. Nazareth represents a place of nurture. As far as we know, Jesus spent most of his life there. Nazareth was the place that formed him for the time of his ministry, helping to shape his character and prepare him for periods of courage and sacrifice.

For some, these last two years, alongside the trials, there have also been places of nurture. Finding new rhythms which bring peace. For others, there are neglected parts of the soul that desperately need nurturing in the coming year. How will that happen? What does it mean to foster a place of nurture in difficult times?

Three locations: Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth.

If you look at these locations geographically on the map they form a triangle. Bethlehem on the bottom right, Egypt on the bottom left and Nazareth at the top. Picture that triangle for a moment, the place of danger, the place of escape and the place of nurture. Where would you place yourself in the triangle right now?

Would you put yourself in one corner, perhaps tending towards danger but with perhaps a little bit of nurture? Or perhaps you would place yourself between nurture and escape? And I wonder, as you think about the year to come, where you expect to find yourself in the triangle? Is that different to where you are now? Or where you were last year?

On the Epiphany Sunday, when we think about the gentiles, the wise men to whom the new King, the Christ child was revealed – where do you think God is in the triangle. Is God with you in the place of danger? Or is he leading you into danger? Is faith a matter of escape – retreating into the spiritual world where earthy things are less overwhelmingly and less depressing and where hope and freedom and peace are close at hand? Or is God, for you, about nurture and growth and understanding – with few moments of revelation – rather slow deepening of character and relationship?

As you place yourselves in the triangle, I am sure you will all have placed yourselves in very different locations and have very different understandings of where you are and where you think you should be. Someone who comes to our services seeking an oasis of escape from the challenges and burdens of their current experience will be horrified by a Bethlehem message – being called to the place of danger with Christ.

But I don't believe it is my place to nudge anyone into Bethlehem, Egypt or Nazareth, but to craft a space within the triangle which allows us to share our dangers, share our oases and new understandings and helping us to meet God in each one. Let us help each other to stay within the triangle as we journey together.