

SERMON 820

Feast of Epiphany

January 5, 2014

927th Week as Priest

753rd Week at St Dunstan's

18th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

NOTHING CAN STOP THE GOSPEL

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

They say we're living in a post-Christian world. Islam is the fastest-growing of the world religions. All of the churches, the major denominations, are in perilous decline—except for the mega churches and the Pentecostals. Our own beloved Episcopal Church has fallen in numbers from more than 5 million in the 1950s to about a million today.

Are people just not religious any longer?

Have they given up looking for God?

Well, I have a hard time believing it. There is so much mystery about life—about the world we live in, and the complexity and variety of life as we know it—that I think people are still struggling as they always have to try to understand why we are here and what we're supposed to be doing.

Sure, there are lots of people who have all the answers, or they think they do, and they are ready to close the book on further discovery, learning, challenge, possibility, and growth. But that is not who we are. We are people who have had a glimpse of what Saint Paul called, “the wisdom of God in its rich variety.”

We know that life, human life, each individual life, is of infinite importance to the God of All Creation. And we believe with sure and certain hope that this same God is restoring the dignity of human nature.

All is not lost. Once again I say, there is much more than meets the eye. It is not just what it is.

It would be easy, and even understandable, for us to become discouraged, or to lose our perspective, or to give up on our sure and certain hope. But to do so would be to deny the very thing that God has made known to us in the fullness of time.

Paul told the Ephesians of the deep mystery of life, and how that in former generations this mystery was not made known. But we know this sacred story like the back of our hand, and we know its truth like the sound of our own name.

There were those in the time of Jesus of Nazareth who feared the Good News. They were what Paul named, “enemies of the cross of Christ.” They wanted no part of sacrificial love, or gentleness, or turning the other cheek. They would tolerate no change in the status quo, no interruption or disturbance of their

power and authority. Herod the Great, of course, was most disturbed of all.

When the three wise men, the magi, came to the court of Herod in Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” He was threatened and frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. A new king? We can’t have that! We like things just the way they are. We don’t want change. Yes, we might want things to get a little better, but we don’t want them to be any different!

This is the way that human beings can be, you see. They don’t want to acknowledge new information, different explanations or causes, new revelations—that would mean that the old ways are no longer operative, that they couldn’t keep on doing things the way they’ve always done them.

The wise men, the Three Kings, had seen the star at its rising, and they had followed the star to this holy place. Yes, it was unlikely, but they knew the prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, that nations would come to his light and kings to the brightness of his dawn. They had read Micah and discovered that Bethlehem would be the place where the Messiah would be born. They understood the words of the psalmist, that this Messiah would be a king of justice, one who would rule with righteousness and blessing, one who would care for the lowly and poor and preserve the lives of the needy. Herod wanted no part of that! And he would not allow it. (Do you remember that

he sent his soldiers to Bethlehem a few days after the birth, when the magi had returned home by another way, and they put to death all of the children of Bethlehem? They were the first martyrs of Christianity, called the Holy Innocents, and of course they were never baptized.)

But Joseph saved the child and his mother. In a dream, the angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt and stay there until Herod had died. How deeply mysterious it all is! What a wonderful and sacred story! The ways of evil men are thwarted by angels and dreams and a loving God who seeks to restore the dignity of human nature. *Nothing can stop the Gospel of Jesus Christ.* Even when it all hangs by a thread, on the breath of an infant, God will not let go or give up. *Nothing can stop the Gospel.*

This is the truth of our Christian story, and it is the truth of your life as well. So do not give up hope: Our God lives.

May his Name remain for ever, and be established as long as the sun endures; may all the nations bless themselves in him and call him blessed. **AMEN.**

910 words