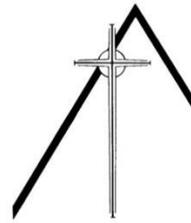


“Star Light, Star Bright”
Matthew 2:1-12
Rev. Jacqueline Decker Vanderpol
January 6, 2019



Clint Barton looks like your average New York citizen. Like most New Yorkers, he wasn't born there. He was born in Waverly, Iowa. While he was still young, both of his parents died in a car accident, so he and his brother spent six years in an orphanage before they ran away to join the Carson Carnival of Traveling Wonders. It was in the carnival that Clint met a man they called Swordsman. Swordsman saw something special in Clint, taking him under his wing and training him to be a master archer. That's how Clint got his nickname of "Hawkeye" – for his amazing archery skills. It's those skills that have become like a super-power for Clint, the skills he uses as he spends his spare time fighting crime on the tough streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, often encountering dangerous conflicts with the Russian mafia causing trouble in his neighborhood. But Hawkeye doesn't fight for righteousness alone. He belongs to a special gang of professional – and mysterious – warriors known internationally as the Avengers.

As a modern-day comic book – and now movie – superhero, Hawkeye falls into a long line of innocuous-looking, disguised superheroes. By removing his eyeglasses and the dull suit he wears when reporting for the Daily Planet, Clark Kent instantly becomes Superman. Bruce Wayne transforms from a wealthy playboy and philanthropist into the crime-fighting Batman. Diana Prince, the army nurse, becomes Wonder Woman and Selina Kyle, a thieving teen, becomes Cat Woman. It's hard to imagine comic books without the ruse of superheroes in disguise. After all, the world of comic books is one where physical appearance is not an accurate representation of a person's personality, where physical appearance is not an accurate representation of a person's identity. It's a world where a person's apparent simplicity is often a disguise for their covert complexity.¹

Maybe it's not just comic books, though. Maybe we realize that often plain-looking people have fascinating stories. That many people are more than meets the eye. That's exactly what the Zoroastrian priests were looking for. Which is who the magi were. They weren't really wise men, and they definitely weren't kings, they were priests for the Zoroastrian faith that was the official religion of Persia until it converted to Islam. As such, they spent their days interpreting dreams and understanding astrology. They told fortunes and prepared daily horoscopes, and as scholars, they enjoyed access to the Persian emperor. Like the Jews, Zoroastrians were waiting for the miraculous birth of a Savior by a virgin, and the priests studied the stars to predict when the baby would be born.²

And then one day, they – we don't know how many of them there were; we say three because they brought three gifts – one day, the magi saw that star. And they travelled from the east to find the baby who was more than meets the eye. A savior disguised as a helpless infant. Tradition has filled in the details about the magi: They were from Asia, some say. They were

¹ Thanks to the following article for inspiring the thought of superheroes as examples of epiphany (Hawkeye, in particular): "Class Action Hero," *Pepperdine Magazine*, Sara Bunch, Spring 2018.

² "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12," *Working Preacher*, Niveen Sarras, 2019.

from Africa, others say. No, from Europe. All of which make sense given that Jerusalem can be seen to be at the intersection of these three great continents. Asia, Africa, and Europe come to represent the three portions of the known world, they represent the world coming together to pay homage to the newly born king of the Jews. Although with the Zoroastrian priests kneeling beside the manger, representing the known world, you start to wonder if this savior-in-disguise might be more than just the king of the *Jews*. You start to wonder if he might be king of the... world.³

This is why for nearly all of Christian history until recent memory, Epiphany was the real celebration, the real high holy day, while Christmas was just a *meh* holiday. The epiphany wasn't just a baby being revealed to the magi as the savior. The Epiphany continues to be that that baby didn't come to be savior for *some* people. The baby came for *all* people. That seems like such a feel-good thought until you remember that the Persians – and remember the magi are Persians – that the Persians were allies with Rome, and Rome was the enemy of the Jews. The magi are almost placeholders for the enemies of the Jews. So the epiphany isn't just that God is disguised as a baby in a barn; it's also that God's children are disguised as the major irritants in our life. Today we celebrate that Jesus came for *us* – and we remember Jesus also came for those who have hurt us, those who threaten our well-being, those we resent and hold grudges against, those we don't understand.

When the magi left the manger, we are told they went “home by another way,” taking a different path than the one that got them there. Home by another way. We've travelled to Bethlehem, recognized the star and the baby. And now it's our turn to listen as God calls us travel by a new way. Amen.

Every year the Oxford English Dictionary picks a “Word of the Year”. Over the last several years, the words of the year have included: selfie, vape, post-truth, and last year's word was youthquake. A youthquake is a significant social or political event arising from the actions of young people – think of the gun control movement advanced by the teens at Stoneman Douglas High School. That was a youthquake. Then, of course, there was 2015 when the dictionary picked an emoji as its “word” of the year. In case you're curious it was the emoji was with tears of joy. For 2018, the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year is “toxic.” As in “imbued with poison. Given the climate of our national discourse, this is no surprise. But it's more than disheartening that if our national life last year could be summed up in a single word, it would be toxic.

At the same time, the pastor Sue Westfall points out, the “*Christian Science Monitor* recently reported that words like ‘love,’ ‘kindness,’ and ‘patience,’ are being used less frequently in American life. [It's not just that we're using more toxic words, we're also using fewer benevolent words.] The juxtaposition is stark. Words matter. Even in a digital age when images and emojis often replace words, words matter. They interpret but, even more consequentially, they shape our reality and experience. Words wound and they heal. They obfuscate and enlighten. They degrade and they uplift. The writer of the book of James was well aware of the power of words. He warned: ‘*How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire! With the tongue (words) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are*

³ “Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century*, David Keck, November 29, 2018.

made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so!’’⁴

The way we speak to others matters. The way we speak to ourselves does too. The words we direct at ourselves. The words we use to set our resolutions and intentions. In recent years, the Church has combined our belief in the power of words and the practice of New Year’s Resolutions into the tradition of star words. A word given to you on Epiphany that will direct your spiritual practice through the coming year. I’ve invited Joyce Moore to share with us her star word from last year, given to her by a different church, and how the word challenged and shaped her faith over the past year.

⁴ “Words Matter,” *Macedonian Ministry*, Sue Westfall, January 1, 2019.