

“Simple and Extraordinary”
January 7, 2024

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-11

The Shakers told us, “’Tis a gift to be simple.’

The song we heard this morning told us, “God loves all simple things” and even dared to affirm, “For God is the simplest of all.”

Perhaps.

But the scriptures point us beyond the simple to the extraordinary.

The prophet announces the shining light that is the very glory of God and paints a picture of sea-borne riches and the wealth of nations, of camels laden with gold and frankincense—all arriving in a restored Jerusalem, heralding the praise of God.

Matthew’s beloved story of the magi seeking and finding the infant Jesus is filled with treasures—adding myrrh to Isaiah’s gold and frankincense—and tells of a brilliant star that leads the magi on their journey.

Far from simple, scripture takes us into the extraordinary.

And as we listen to scripture and look at our lives carefully, we begin to see how the simple and the extraordinary are connected in our lives and in our world.

We can start, as Matthew does, with the stars—which tell us of creation in all its vast grandeur.

The nearest stars are Alpha Centauri A and B, a binary pair about 4.3 light years away—that’s about 25 *trillion* miles, give or take—and they are our closest neighbors. When we look at those stars, we are seeing light that began its journey to earth over four years ago.

The most distant star in our Milky Way galaxy is some 900 *thousand* light-years from Earth—a distance that even astronomers find almost too large to comprehend. When the light left from that star our early human ancestors were just starting to make fires here on Earth.¹

Beyond this, there are known galaxies some 13 *gigalightyears* away. Now a gigalightyear is 1 *billion* light years—you do the math on that kind of distance.

To look at the stars is to be reminded of our finitude, our smallness. In the vastness of the universe, our own solar system is almost non-existent.

¹ <https://www.space.com/26483-milky-way-most-distant-stars.html>

To look at the stars is to be reminded of our limits. We are bound to this earth, bound to these few years, watching star light that started toward us long before this church was founded, long before the time of Jesus or the Hebrew prophets.

Sometimes to look at the stars is to feel small and limited and painfully alone in it all.

Remember how the psalmist put it?

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mere mortals that you care for them?

To look at the stars is also to sense something even greater. In faith we claim that beyond the distant stars is the creative power that gives being to all things; that there is a great and loving purpose that sustains the heavens and this earth; that beyond all that light and all that darkness in the night there is a Creator who still knows us creatures.

We look up to the heavens in the hope that beyond the beginning—and beyond the ending—is One who is both beginning and end, first and last.

We hope. In our finitude and our smallness, in our wonder and awe, we look at the stars and hope.

Stars are extraordinary, but what we have learned from the stars is that we are extraordinary as well. As Joni Mitchell put it long ago, “*We* are stardust.”

Astronomers now theorize that the thermonuclear reactions in stars could slowly seed a universe with the elements from which life is derived. Allan Sandage of the Carnegie Observatories explained it this way: “Every one of our chemical elements was once inside...the same star. We came from the same supernova.”

We are dust—simple dust. We are, simply, part of the earth, connected to it, rooted in it. And yet, it is as though the farthest reaches of space are found in our bodies. The transcendent is immanent.

Simple yet extraordinary.

We hear this morning not only of light and stars but also of gifts—again, extraordinary ones. The Gospel seems to recall the gifts that the prophet Isaiah said the nations would bring to the Temple in the restored Jerusalem after the people returned from exile in Babylon. The renewed city would be a place of light, attracting people who would bring with them the wealth of their countries.

Good gifts often say something about the receiver—you are the kind of person who would like this music; these tools might be just what you are looking for; this color is right for you. Gold and frankincense suggest that the child who receives them will be a great ruler.

Myrrh suggests he will die.

Looking at these extraordinary gifts we remember other gifts as well—simple yet extraordinary.

This life is a gift. The earth is a gift. Love is a gift. In many ways this church is a gift—both the church as a building and the church as a congregation. For this church is the legacy of faithful members in the past, an offering of faithful members today. We care for it in our time here. And freely we will pass it on to new members, a new generation, for ongoing ministry and mission.

God gives all gifts—life, love, this planet. And God gives us gifts for the building up of the church, for our common good. Each of us, all of us have gifts—received from God—that can be used both in the ministry of this congregation and far beyond these four walls.

The gifts of God keep showing up where we would least expect them.

The light of God is found shining brightest in the places of deep shadows.

The fullness of God is found in those places where people are hungry and poor, as we work together and together seek the abundance that God freely offers and desires for all.

The peace of God in the turmoil of our lives and the chaos of our world is found as we challenge the ways in which we make violence and warfare the preferred option.

The wholeness of God in our grief and illness, indeed in our sin, is found when we look for it in places of brokenness.

Simple gifts—extraordinary gifts.

This morning we are once again invited to the table, to this feast of Christ broken and poured out. For this meal we bring the simple gifts of God—wheat of the field, fruit of the vineyard—gifts that by human effort have been transformed into bread and wine. These gifts that we bring are given back to us in an extraordinary way as the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

This is a meal for those who are empty, who seek wholeness, who actively hope for peace and life. That is to say, this is a meal for people like you and me. The German theologian Michael Welker reminds us that each time we come to this table we, like the Magi, are at the beginning of a journey. The bread and cup nourish us so that we can set out once more, following in the way of Jesus Christ in all the simple yet extraordinary places of our world.