

*We Three Kings*  
Isaiah 60:1-6  
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January 10, 2021

One thing I've learned over time is that you can avoid a lot of disappointment by keeping your expectations low. I got another lesson in this last Wednesday. People my age have never really expected much of Congress, but you know, maybe we've been setting the bar a little too high. This is not always one of my finer qualities. I'm aware that sometimes I just come across as sort of cynical. People want their pastors to be hopeful and encouraging, you know? Step out in faith. Dream big, the pastor should say. Anything is possible with God - more than you could ask or imagine. And here I come preaching the gospel on some of my least articulate days. "Hear the Good News: Sometimes God underdelivers!"

The truth is I am averse to disappointment. Like most anyone I don't like to feel the pain of loss. I think it's true that a lot of people wind up growing away from God because the goods delivered fell short of expectations. What was hoped for was not provided. That must be the conundrum of any faithful person who is living with any profound loss - called to worship a god who has let me down. In some cases that kind of disappointment leads to hopelessness and despair. Other people have such low expectations of God in the first place that they're not worshiping God at all. They've been praying to all sorts of lower and lesser gods. Now these are the gods that really deliver. Money and sex. Power and freedom. Career. If you've got high expectations of the holy, don't come to a church that's going to ask something of you. You should find one of these gods that actually pays. The pantheon of idols is highly populated. Some of us can go our whole lives worshiping a God as cold as the coin in our pockets. We're just looking for a god that actually keeps their promises.

I hope you can sense my small theology of low expectations is an attempt at good humor. But this year at Christmas I really felt there was something to it. Most years at Christmas, the bar is set so high that I know I have no hope of reaching it. So it feels sort of like a grind - to find the perfect gifts, to meet everyone's wishes, to travel or to host, to prepare meals and feed a crowd. And aside from all that I've got a church full of people coming on Christmas Eve and it's my job to connect them to the great mysteries of God's presence among us. That's partly what makes Christmas so meaningful to me - much is asked of me and much is given to me.

I don't know about you - but if ever my expectations for Christmas were low, it was this year. I mean low. Rock bottom low. For once I was not asking for too much. All I want for Christmas is for all of us to live. And I must say, for once - maybe just in my case if not in yours - God did not disappoint. In fact God sort of, uncharacteristically, over-delivered. My family, perhaps like yours, spent weeks in consideration of how best to approach any sort of Christmas visiting. Sometimes this involved delicate negotiation. We decided that my brother who would otherwise be alone in Washington, DC would come down and stay with us for a few days. And then together we would drive out to visit our family on Christmas Day, everyone wearing face masks and everyone committed to remaining outdoors despite the cold and wind. We first went to our grandmother's house near Winston-Salem. She opened the door and sat in the doorway while we stood out in the open air of her screen porch. We exchanged gifts and hung a couple of birdhouses that Jackson had built for her. She seemed quite comfortable sitting in the heat of her

house but it was 35 degrees outside so after about a half an hour we needed to move on. Next we went to my other grandmother's house, which is usually filled with mountains of wrapped presents and a houseful of cousins gathered around a long breakfast on Christmas morning. This year we found tidy stacks of gifts carefully placed on the windy carport. My grandmother bundled herself up against the cold and came out to serve a hot spiced tea. This too lasted not more than thirty minutes. No one seemed to appreciate my insistence that we all sit a few more minutes for what I was calling "pandemic portraits," though we all got a good laugh when I accused Memaw of not smiling behind her mask. We'd all taken such strict measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 I thought it would be too bad if anyone died of hypothermia, so we said goodbye and returned to the car. Soon we arrived at the home of my parents, who I'm afraid had all but given up on us coming at all as they had to be roused from an afternoon nap when we arrived. They came out with piping hot tea and fresh cookies. Since our outdoors spaces have become so much more important this year, we delivered for Christmas new rocking chairs. The most impressive thing about the whole day is that Jackson and my dad kept their fingers working in the cold long enough to put those new chairs together. We'd bought our little dog a special sweater to keep warm on this sleigh ride to grandma's house, but by this point he'd concluded that if no one else had the good sense to go inside that wouldn't stop him. So he sat inside the storm door and looked at us with genuine worry for our sanity.

This was hardly the Christmas experience that we have come to expect over so many years in our family, but my goodness will I ever treasure those minutes standing out in the cold. Many Christmases have faded from my memory but I will never forget the year that Three Wise Guys came from the East. If you attended any of the prayer services that took place on Wednesday as we waited for the all clear from the Capitol, many pointed out that January 6 was not just a day of momentous political action. It was also the Feast of the Epiphany. Those women and men standing in the fields, the shepherds who left their flocks, the kings who came following a star - what did they expect to find? Did God deliver more or less than what they'd hoped?

I don't much think these ancient people would go through so much trouble for a God who by reputation fails to deliver anything of importance. On the other hand, to arrive at the end of a long journey with certain expectations for what you may find seems ungrateful. So I can only imagine these Magi undertook their journey with nothing very clear in mind. Only faith that God will go with them. Only hope that God will be present. Only love sealed by the gift of Jesus's birth.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you." Glory to God in the highest.