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January 5, 2020
Worship Theme: Perspective

Call to Worship:

Our worship theme this month is perspective. Sometimes our perspective, what we know to be true, clouds our ability to see a bigger picture and a larger truth. As we enter a new year, we have yet another chance to start fresh with open eyes. In that spirit, I call us to worship with these words from Naomi Shihab Nye:

To move

Cleanly.

Needing to be

Nowhere else.

Wanting nothing

From any store.

To lift something

You already had

And set it down in

A new place.

Awakened eye

Seeing freshly.

What does that do to

The old blood moving

through

Its channels?

May our eyes be awakened, may our vision be open to new truths. Let us worship together.

Please rise in body or in spirit for our opening hymn, #1 in the Grey Hymnal, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door.”

Opening Hymn: “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door” Grey 1

Chalice Lighting: Maureen Mulhern

Personal Point: Kathy Hoben

Prayer... Centering: Balm in Gilead

Reading: “Utopia” by Wislawa Szymborska

(*A Large Number*, trans. by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh)

Island where all becomes clear.

Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned

and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.

Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.

Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,

and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches

turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave

and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

Sermon Title: New Year, New Perspective

Utopia, the island where all becomes clear.

“If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.”

Everywhere you look there is meaning, conviction, truth.

Doesn't that sound peaceful.

But we don't live there.

One thing I love that is kind of meta about that poem is that even reading it in English we are missing a layer of her true meaning.

Szyborska wrote in Polish, so this poem about certainty is rife with the uncertainty of translation.

In January many people make resolutions. We want to be resolute, certain in our new plan to live better lives.

At a New Year's Eve party, a witchy friend of mine gave everyone who wanted a tarot card reading, to help us set our resolutions or at least our intentions for the year.

I enjoy tarot cards because they are like Bible stories.

Statements like that are how you know you are in a UU church.

But it's true: Tarot and the Bible: lots of possible interpretations, not a lot of resolute answers.

It's what you do with your interpretation that matters.

The questions my friend asked the tarot cards for me were these:
in the new year,

What do I need to honor;

What should I start anew;

What shall I let go of;

What should I indulge in;
What should I hold fast in?

Good questions to ask ourselves even without tarot cards!

In the new year,
What do you need to honor;
What will you start anew;
What will you let go of;
What will you indulge in;
What will you hold fast in?

The card she turned for what I should indulge in was interesting. It was the Wheel of Fortune—but it was upside down. So in my friend's interpretation, combined with the other cards I had gotten, my fortune for the year was that I should honor and indulge in the fact that I have no control over the universe. Enjoy my powerlessness. I should prepare less and trust myself and the universe more, and that was a good and even delicious thing—an indulgence. More love, less control.

But while we turn our attention to the new year, my Christian friends are reminding me it is technically still Christmas. Today is the 11th day of Christmas, so I hope you already purchased 11

pipers piping for your loved ones because they are sold out *everywhere*.

January 6 is the 12th day of Christmas.

Many cultures celebrate January 6th, sometimes called Three King's day, as the day of gifts and feasting rather than Christmas Day.

In the Christian calendar, this day is called Epiphany.

On Epiphany the world as the wise men knew it was turned upside down.

God is revealed in a poor, vulnerable baby.

Empires tremble. Despots are disobeyed.

In the story three wise men from the East see a star. The way the story is told, they don't have a debate over what the star means.

The wise men are described as immediately knowing what it means, as though the Star of Understanding shines over the Valley of Obviously, shimmers on the spring called Now I Get It, and illuminates a stable filled with the Essence of Things.

The wise men see that bright star and they know:

- 1) a baby has been born
- 2) he's a special baby
- 3) he'll grow up to be "King of the Jews."

When I look at the night sky, I need an app to tell me what I'm seeing, so these wise men are definitely ahead of the game.

The wise men go to King Herod, the evil and treacherous ruler of Judea, and tell him what they have seen and what it means.

The story says that Herod is frightened,
“and all Jerusalem with him.”

For when a leader is a weak bully, and easily frightened,
and medicates his fear with erratic violence,
his people are wise to be afraid.

Herod consults with his yes-men, and tells the wise men to go
find this child, and when they have found the child, to let Herod
know exactly where he is.

The wise men follow the star until they find a stable, and in it, a
poor homeless mother and father and a baby in a manger.

This, powerless baby born of a powerless family,
with no money, no home, no bed, this is a holy baby?

It was like turning a picture of God upside down.

All they could do was leave
and plunge, never to return,
into the depths of unfathomable life.

Instead of returning, as ordered, to Herod, these wise men take
another path home.

They know that Herod’s reaction to the world turned upside
down will not be joy and praise, but hatred and death.

Imagine that this story about the Three Wise Men is a tarot
card—your attention and interpretation and imagination are
what gives the story power.

The story of the wise men is not a historical story.

The question of “Did this really happen, literally?” is just not important.

(This is another statement that helps you know you are in a UU church.)

Our question today is an imagination question, a question of perspective: What does this story say to us here and now?

Can you imagine setting off on a journey, with hope in your heart and fear in your gut and stars in your eyes?

Can you imagine discovering something that turns your whole world upside down?

Turning the world upside down was an important part of my sabbatical.

I did a lot of painting, and one of the best practices when painting from a photo is to turn the photo upside down and begin your painting upside down.

Your eyes can see better when your brain’s constant interpretation and “knowing” what you are seeing is turned off.

If you “know” you are painting a car or a boat, you will start to outline a car or a boat, and it will look stupid.

Or at least, mine would.

But if you turn it upside down and just start painting the dark and the light, the shapes and the shadows, when you turn your picture right side up many hours later, you will find it holds a greater beauty, a greater truthfulness to life.

When our brain thinks it already knows what our eyes are seeing, we don't see the whole picture.

There's a story I read in the newspaper a few years ago that I've never been able to forget that reminds me how "knowing" with our brains can get in the way of what our eyes know is true.

A beloved woman named Val-Jean McDonald died at the age of 81. She left behind eight sons, 20 grandchildren, almost 20 great-grandchildren, and three great-great-grandchildren.

There her family is, at her funeral, at her church, with the open casket in front of them.

The woman in the open casket was wearing Val-Jean's favorite white suit, her favorite pink blouse, her favorite jewelry.

She looked...different, and her family had some...doubts, but dispelled them.

Disease and death, embalming, and make-up can alter a person's appearance.

It was only a child,

one of Val-Jean's grandchildren who said out loud

"Daddy, that's not Grandma."

Hush, child.

But then, a week later,

the funeral home called, with a stunning revelation,

to say that there had been a horrible mistake.

As it turns out, the little boy was right.

That had not been his grandmother in the coffin.
His grandmother's body was still at the funeral home.¹
Now, aside from asking just how such a monumental mistake could have ever happened, the more unsettling question, to me, is how more than a hundred family and friends, gathered around the wrong body, kissed her face, said goodbye, accepting that it was Val-Jean.
Even when they had doubts, they didn't speak up.
Only a child was willing to say the unthinkable, the impossible.
Sometimes we are so sure something must be true, we ignore what our own eyes are telling us, we don't take in the new information that would break through our certainty and lead to a greater truth.

King Herod *knew* that he must stay in power at all costs.
When the wise men refused to return and lead Herod's men to the baby, King Herod's response to uncertainty and the threat to his power was to kill as many babies and children as he could, in case one of them was this mysterious threatening baby.
It is called the Massacre of the Innocents, part of the Christmas story that is not often told.
It is even said Herod killed his own children in case they were a threat to his power, and that people of the time said "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/nyregion/wrong-woman-cremated-bronx.html>

Szyborska, our poet today, in her lecture upon winning the Nobel Prize, talked about how being sure you “know” everything, being drunk on certainty, is the birthplace of death. But being able to say “I don’t know” is the birthplace of all creativity and inspiration.

She said—in words still very apt today:

All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans ... enjoy their jobs, and ...perform their duties with ... fervor... [because] they “know.”

They know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all.

They don’t want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments’ force.

And any knowledge that doesn’t lead to new questions quickly dies out....

In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

She says that little phrase “I don’t know” is

...small, but it flies on mighty wings.

It expands our lives....

If Isaac Newton had never said to himself “I don’t know,” the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto...

Think back to Szyborska's island Utopia,
empty of all life.

Think how eery it would be, how silent.

The place of Certainty, of unshakeable, unwavering confidence,
is a place of death.

It is Herod's home. It is the tyrant's home.

The faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

The wise men knew it, and turned away.

All you can do is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths of
unfathomable life.

Even as I plan to indulge in uncertainty this year, I do appreciate
that there are people who know some things better than me.

Right before I came back from sabbatical I traveled to Colorado
to give the invocation at the Air Force promotion service of an
old college friend of Ben's named Pam.

I *knew* Pam—fun Pam, drinking buddy Pam, college friend Pam.
As I opened the program for the ceremony I realized I did *not*
know Pam, or should I say,

Colonel Pamela Alley, Chief of Counter Intelligence and Human
Intelligence for the North American Aerospace Defense
Command, NORAD.

And there are a lot of things I do not know,

and never will know, that she knows.

And as I took part in that ceremony—which began with not only the American national anthem, but also the Canadian national anthem—I felt renewed hope for our country.

We are not alone.

Even as we watch King Herod proclaim certainty and wield death, stars still shine above, and there are wise people who can read them.

There are wise people who can make good decisions, who have humility in all they do not know,
who are willing to take a different path,
who refuse to unthinkingly follow the Herods of the world.
It's not everything. It's not a certainty. But it is something.

Sometimes the wise person is a child, who says the thing that is unimaginable and impossible, yet also true.

The wise men took what they knew and turned it upside down.

Where others saw certainty, they saw shadows and starlight.

Where Herod chose control, they chose love.

More love, less control.

This year, let's do that.

Amen, and may it be so.

Closing Hymn: “Be Thou My Vision” Grey 20