

A WEIRD and VUCA World

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 2, 2022

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Sermon text: I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe. Ephesians 1:18-19

Happy New Year. Here's to a better year than 2021. Of course that is a very low bar. But even though we are in the midst of an omicron COVID spike there is reason to believe the pandemic is coming to an end. Let's hope so, but who can say these days? So much uncertainty, unpredictability, so many things we don't see because of the way our limited experience has trained us to look that any predictions are bound to be wrong. And here's why:

We live in a WEIRD world full of VUCA. Let me unpack the two acronyms.

WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic. From a book by Joseph Heinrich (2020) on how the west became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous. Heinrich is a social psychologist whose work has revealed that many of our classic psychological experiments were made using undergraduates and others in a narrow slice of humanity, such that when the experiments were tried in other parts of the world or with other demographics, quite different results were obtained. We in the WEIRD world simply see things differently than others in other times and places—and we often fail to account for that narrowness of perspective.

VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. VUCA is an acronym first used in the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, of the RAND Corporation. Their work was developed as part of the response of the US Army War College to the collapse of the USSR in the late nineteen eighties, early nineties. Suddenly, there was no longer a polar enemy, no longer a clarity of ideologies, instead a new vortex of unleashed forces and trends, demanding new ways of seeing and reacting. The VUCA model has been widely adopted in business and investment circles—and I was introduced to it as part of an Episcopal Church project looking at the future of the church.

Climate change and increased global connections only add to the picture.

And here is my new year's prediction: our world is only going to get more WEIRD and VUCAful.

That's a pretty safe bet, but how do we find our bearings in such a volatile environment?

Let's consider the gospel story today of the three magi. The wise observers of the sky saw the star rising then and followed it to Bethlehem. We are invited to follow it still. The guiding star of our faith, the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ some two millennia ago.

And where does this star lead, is there a harbor in a turbulent sea of change and disorder?

Oddly—or perhaps predictably—I want to say: **church**, a place where gather from all sorts of backgrounds and with a wide diversity of personal perspectives, who yet embrace a common object of worship: God, as taught and embodied by Jesus. By accepting that Jesus is who he claimed to be, the Son of God, accepting his life as singular and sacred and worthy of following, we enter into this community of faith. This is formally and sacramentally recognized in baptism, but is in fact a condition of the spirit. It includes doubts and struggles and questions—the key point is the willingness to follow Jesus, to trust in the power of love and forgiveness. To step forward in faith, to walk in the darkness following the lamp of the Word of God.

And to step forward together, providing hope and help for each other and the larger community. To knit together people increasingly isolated and distrustful. That is our work in this time.

And if you want an example of the type of person such a Christin can be I would point to Desmond Tutu, recently deceased bishop of South Africa, winner of the Nobel Peace prize for his work on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee there, steadfast opponent of apartheid, friend of all, source of joy. I commend his book coauthored with the Dalai Lama, *The Book of Joy, Lasting happiness in a Changing World*.

I had a couple of brief encounters myself with him. One was in the country of Colombia, where he was part of a team from South Africa presenting their work on restorative justice, the Truth and Reconciliation panel, to folks in Colombia emerging from a decades long civil war and wondering how to proceed with reconciliation. And I met him briefly at an event at General Seminary. He was the guest of honor, yet when he entered he took a seat in the back—though he was quickly ushered to the front. He was clearly weak from cancer treatments

yet he exuded joy and stayed to greet everyone and sign his book. Desmond Tutu, may he rest in peace, was a courageous and tenacious fighter for justice, and a person of irrepressible joy and deep humility. In short, a saint in the sense of a hero of the faith, a model Christian, someone very worthy of emulating.

But you don't have to think only of saints and heroes when thinking about model Christians. You are surrounded by them—just this morning for instance, thinking of people in this congregation I admire, I happened to glance at an old bulletin in the robing room, of the funeral in March 2020 of Betty Rae Nittiskie. What an amazing person—full of strength, competence, wisdom and an infinite love of children. She headed up our Sunday School for years, she did many things well, and when she asked you to help, you said yes. There was something about her.

But so there is for each of us. We all have different gifts. That is why we need community, that is the point of church. The Holy Spirit has given each of us something to contribute to the whole, and together we make a whole, a body of Christ.

Hold on to that, my friends, in every year. I know it is often impossible to distinguish right actions in a VUCA world, but perhaps it is helpful to have a bit of humility about being WEIRD and not universal, about therefore obliged to listen better and try to understand those with a different world and worldview.

Take the long view. For instance, it is clear that the church is no longer culturally ascendent. I was in a bookstore last week and books on Tarot and magic were prominently displayed on the top shelves, while books on Judaism and Christianity were banished to the bottom of the section on "Spirituality." But the church may be better off, truer to Christ, when humble and out of power than when Christendom ruled the West and the world. After all, by showing the example of Christian love and self-sacrifice, Christians—drawn for large part from the poor and the enslaved demographics of the ancient world—non-violently conquered the Roman empire. This is the non-imperial form of Christianity that has changed the world for the better: introducing charitable hospitals, schools, mutual aid societies around the world. These are seeds that promote a better world.

Let us trust in God's planting, and water and nurture where we can. God will give the power to grow. Let us also remember that we are all implicated and complicit in the violence and injustice of history and the world. We need forgiveness and repentance for ourselves as well. But do not let the impossibility of final success, the certainty of ambiguous results stop you from trying. Micah's old advice still works as a new year resolution: God has told you, O mortal, what

is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to **do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

Let me close with a prayer from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, part of our readings this morning: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe."

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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