

# *Following a Star*

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup>For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. <sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. <sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. <sup>6</sup>A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

## Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I think it's safe to say that collectively one of our favorite moments in worship every year is the hallowed singing of "Silent Night," at the end of the Christmas Eve services. Many people, I presume, come to church at Christmas for that particular once-a-year moment, and maybe the memories and wonder it engenders, as the overhead lights grow dim and sheer beauty fills the sanctuary with candlelight and singing.

What we, who have the privilege of leading worship get to see from the front of the sanctuary looking out into the congregation is how every single person's face is set aglow throughout the whole expansive space. As the light is passed along the pews, slowly the faces of so many individuals begin to reflect that Christ candle light and to shine.

The Bible says that's what happens when people encounter God: their faces shine. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he frightened the people waiting for him, and they knew he had seen God up on that mountain because his face was shining. Toward the end of Israel's long bondage in exile, when signs of freedom and the promise of returning to their homeland came into view, the prophet Isaiah said: "Arise, shine, for your light has come."

This is the message of Epiphany. The birth of Jesus we just celebrated at Christmas revealed God as Light in darkness. Epiphany means that Light is "made manifest;" – it is embodied in the world. Because we have seen God in the Christ Child, divine light is now reflected in our shining faces.

The late Peter Gomes, longtime chaplain at Harvard, described Epiphany, saying, "It is very difficult to tear ourselves away from Bethlehem..." after we have laid down our cares and duties there at the manger, where we spent a few days in refuge from the troubles of the world... But there is also "a time to return, to begin where we left off... for we have seen God and survived to tell the tale." We move about not knowing that our faces shine with the encounter, bearing the mark of the

encounter forever. Now, we can marvel in any darkest night of the soul at that wondrous star-filled night.<sup>1</sup>

We know it's true, that leaving the beautiful wonder of Christmas behind is hard, but the message of Epiphany sends us into the New Year with the most important part of Christmas that can never be left behind. The light we beheld in the glory of Jesus' birth is now ours to carry, to make manifest in the world.

No one has said it better than Civil Rights leader and theologian, Howard Thurman, whose words were incorporated into our choir's Christmas Eve candlelight carol this year:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost, to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

That's how we reflect the light of Christ. The Magi – the Wise Men – in Matthew's gospel were making their way through a world that had all the darkness and scary shadows that we have come to know – violence unimaginable with the likes of Herod on the throne; political unrest with whole populations rising up against the powers of the world; economic distress in places like the big city of Jerusalem, and its rural and small town environs like Bethlehem.

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<sup>1</sup> Gomes, paraphrased from *Sermons*.

They come from the East, which may have meant Persia – modern day Iran; or Babylon – in the environs of Iraq; or possibly Arabia, in the realm of today’s Saudi Arabia. No matter where we might locate their origin today, given this week’s killing of Iran’s General Suleimani, and the frightening combination of both cheering and protests threatening retaliation, we understand the provocative geo-political metaphor these Wise Ones from afar represent, then as now. They could not be more remote from the Jewish citizens of Jesus’ birth place in heritage or worldview.

Biblical scholar, Eugene Boring, makes the point: From its first page onward, this gospel is aware that the coming of Christ was indeed light for the world. Not light for only the Jewish people, and not just for Christian people, but light for all people, even those whose quest may have brought them to God in non-biblical, non-traditional, even non-religious ways.<sup>2</sup>

The Wise Men were led by a star... which means they were astrologers, stargazers, scholars who knew there was more to the universe than their mere earthly existence might reveal. They were the kind of people who looked up; and looked beyond their own known frame of reference and contemplated the mysteries that beckon further exploration. That far off star led them to deeper understanding within themselves as they side-stepped cruel Herod, and knelt before the newborn King.

Scientists have tried to explain what these stargazers might have actually seen: Was it the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn? Or was it some huge meteor shower? But the gospel writer Matthew merely points to the mysterious, supernatural aspect of it. First, leading them from the East, it moved westward, and then southwestward over the place where Jesus was, and then it stopped. No regular old star moves like that, and that is what Matthew wants us to know.

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, Interpreters Bible Commentary.

It was a special star for a special child...an act of heaven proclaiming a new king for the earth. A king who will not exercise power with cruelty, tyranny and military might, but with love, forgiveness, social justice and peace. It's no coincidence that the Wise Men had to stop by Herod's place, the epitome of earthly power on their way to find the strength born of humility in God's power. Their gifts say it all: gold for royalty, fragrant Frankincense for purity and holiness, and Myrrh, a strange gift for a baby because it's a perfume used for embalming, a sign of the suffering and sorrow this child will come to know. "These are symbolic gifts for a king who is no symbol but the real thing."<sup>3</sup>

The Wise Men thereby invite us to discern the difference in our world today between the power of Herod's court, smelling of vicious brutality and potential for danger and fear-mongering, and the amazing power of God's glory hidden in this place and in this child. They invite us to take into the New Year not a list of resolutions, so much as a deep resolve to look for God in the most vulnerable of places; to search for how the light of Christ illumines dark corners of our community; to recognize the shining faces of those who have had close encounters with God; and to ponder how we will make manifest the light of God by what we do every day.

Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, edited a collection of prayers and meditations in which she included this: "When God wants an important thing done in this world, or a wrong righted, God goes about it in a very singular way. God doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And God puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart. And she puts it in the baby's mind, and then – God waits. The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert O'Driscoll, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, 12/27/03, 18.

yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.”<sup>4</sup>

That, I believe, is the key message of the star those ancient Wise Ones followed, and the light we are called to reflect – on earth goodwill toward all people.

During my week of vacation after Christmas, I read a novel, and I read Neil deGrasse Tyson’s *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*. I love the way the popular Director of New York City’s planetarium dedicated this slim volume: *For all those who are too busy to read fat books, yet nonetheless seek a conduit to the cosmos.*

The book is a fascinating explanation about how the universe came into being – for people like me for whom a little scientific understanding will suffice! And I will admit, what I found most interesting is how Tyson, the astrophysicist becomes somewhat philosophical in his summary at the end.

He tells the story about being confronted by a psychologist who left one of the planetarium shows concerned that they would make people feel small and insignificant, but Tyson argues the opposite. He admits that our little home on earth is pretty small. “There are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on any beach, more stars than seconds have passed since the Earth was formed, more stars than words and sounds ever uttered by all the humans who ever lived.

Then he says this: “But, you want to know what we are made of? The cosmic perspective offers a bigger answer than you might expect. The chemical elements of the universe are forged in the fires of high-mass stars that end their lives in titanic explosions, enriching their host galaxies with the chemical arsenal of life as we know it. The result?

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<sup>4</sup> Marian Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet*, p. 7.

Hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen – the four most common elements of life on Earth. We do not simply live in this universe,” he concludes, “The universe lives in us.”<sup>5</sup>

We are made up of the elements of an exploded star. Friends, the light of the universe is literally in us. The light of God revealed in Christ is reflected in us. So, our job is to head into this New Year bearing that light with love, forgiveness, real social justice and peace – every day, wherever we go.

AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*, p. 202ff.