

Epiphany 2020
Matthew 2:1-12
January 5, 2020
Rev. Amy P. McCullough, Ph.D.
Grace United Methodist Church

The feast of the Epiphany celebrates the light that came into world through the person of Jesus, a star that reveals Jesus as God's son. With such a message it makes sense to begin today's sermon with a few facts about stars. National Geographic reminds us that stars are "luminous gigantic balls of gas, in which hydrogen converts into helium to produce light and heat." In the Milky Way galaxy alone there are approximately 300 billion stars. As one of our children correctly identified, stars come in various colors. They can be white, yellow, orange, red, or even brown. Large stars live shorter lives than small ones - there is a gospel message in that for us - because larger ones burn through fuel faster than their smaller counterparts. Did you know stars don't actually twinkle? Instead, what we experience as "twinkling" is the star's light encountering the turbulence of Earth's atmosphere as its rays journey to Earth. And lastly, while it is common knowledge that stars are light years away and travel for years upon years before their radiance reaches us, have you ever considered that when you go looking into the night sky you are, in fact, looking back in time?

We peer back into time this morning, remembering the magi from the east who observed a new star rising in the sky, interpreting the star as a sign about the birth of a new king. For their time and place it was a logical connection: a new star, a new king. So they set out to find this new one. Perhaps they intended to simply pay a courtesy visit, akin to the president's courtesy phone call to a new leader. But the length of their journey, their bags packed with the very best gifts, their willingness to set up for a destination undetermined are hints about the restlessness of their souls, their search for something more fulfilling than the world as it was.

Their first stop was Jerusalem. Why? Well, if you've ever been to Jerusalem you can attest that it is an ancient, important city where one would expect to find a king. Jerusalem had fortified walls, a temple, a throne, and important people coming in and out its gates. The wise men were different enough or distinguished enough to gain entrance to the court of King Herod, whom Matthew reminds his readers, is King of the Judea when Jesus is born.

While king was Herod's official title, he had gained his throne not because of his loyalty to Jewish people but because of his allegiance to Rome. By the time of the wise men's visit, King Herod was old. His years of rule had increased his jealousy, greed and fear. The magi's seemingly innocent question - where might we find the child born a king? - landed upon him like a death sentence; the announcement of a rival's arrival, capable of stripping him of his precarious power. Herod pretends to be interested in the wise men's quest. He feigns eagerness to join in their adoration. The lies roll off his lips. "Be sure to come back and tell me when you find him."

Having come to the wrong throne, the magi need other students of scripture to learn a new set of directions. They adjust their destination, traveling south out of Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Once they are out beyond the palace lights, the star appears again in the sky, guiding them at last to the house where Jesus is found. Have you ever stepped outside into a night filled with a thousand stars? Watched the brilliance dance across sky? Taken delight in locating the constellations: the Big Dipper, North Star, or Southern Cross? Have you ever felt the wonder of being held by this loving universe, met by the cosmic force for life? The same light shone from the Christ-child. Here is the force of the universe residing in the flesh-and-blood of a small child, the brilliance of God-with-us.

Where is the child? the wise men inquire. Where can the child be found, repeated Herod. Matthew structures the last story of Christmas around this question of Where. Where is the Messiah? He is found in Bethlehem, the royal city of David, brought into the family through Joseph. In just a few verses Jesus, Mary, and Joseph will settle in Nazareth. How do we know this is Jesus? We know because of where he is found. Matthew uses geography to do theology. Right here is Christ the king.

It is often the case that geography produces theology. Where we find ourselves situated in life shapes how we can see God. I have wandered far from home. I'm lost. God is nowhere to be seen. Or, I've reached the mountaintop. I'm so close to heaven I might touch the skies. God is clearly here. In Matthew's landscape, the *where* also becomes a *how* to find the way, a template for discerning how to go in search of God. The wise men are on the move. They look up at the sky. They take a chance that there is a child worth searching for. They set off for the unknown. They are willing to travel far beyond their own country, to find the One who brings light. They take a wrong turn, winding up in front of the wrong throne. As Walter Brueggemann points out, the work of Epiphany includes acknowledging how we have looked for God in the wrong place.¹

But what guides their way is a star. This miraculous, God-produced light tells them where to go. Biblical scholars might hypothesize about a scientific explanation for the star, whether Halley's comet or another new galactic event might explain a new light in the sky during the season of Jesus's birth. But whatever limitations we have about fully grasping the interworking of hydrogen and helium fusing through the galaxy, we do know that stars don't stagnate over one place or move in a southward direction. This star, just like Jesus's birth, was God's initiative; an assurance that when we ask "Where might I find you, O Christ?" God offers points of light along our way. Christian faith is a journey toward the light of Jesus. So look up, look around, be open to traveling, and resist becoming risk-averse. Be assured that on at least one occasion you will make the wrong turn, but you will not lose the star's guiding light forever. The light will stay with you, carrying to you to Jesus.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, "Missing by Nine Miles," in *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 133-4.

The magi, says Ellen Davis, are stargazers.² They are “masters of an art that opened their minds toward a world beyond them, a world of possibility and hope.” We, Christians, are to be stargazers too, she continues, “discerning a bright point of light in the darkness and following it as we travel a long and unfamiliar road, trusting it leads to God.”

As you entered worship this morning you received a star. I invite you to pull it out, hold it, and pray about the light of Jesus you need in your life in the days ahead. Trust that as you make your journey toward Jesus, he moves toward you. Just as we see the light of Christ, we are asked to be Christ’s light for others. As you hold your star, pray also that God might direct you in your light-giving actions. May we be those who look for the light, follow the light, and carry it for the world to see. Amen.

² Davis, Ellen F., “Stargazers” in *Sermons from Duke Chapel: Voices from “A Great Towering Church,”* William H. Willimon, ed. (Durham: Duke University, 2005), 337-341.