

It's in the Stars

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

January 3, 2021

In a few days we will be celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord. Epiphany means “the manifestation,” or “appearing” of God’s light. It celebrates the appearance of truth in human form, and the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, marking the time the light came into all the world ... not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles from the east as well, represented by the magi.

We Protestants don't observe Epiphany the way many Christians around the world do. How many people will even take notice? They are probably worn out from Christmas and New Years. But the season of Epiphany offers significant hope and encouragement for us and for the church.

Tradition has it that there were three kings, riding on camels, and their names were Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. But nowhere in the bible does it say there were three men or that they were kings. It has become conjecture over the years. Nevertheless, this marks the time when the Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem. It might have taken months. We don't know. They came from the East -- probably Persia — and likely were Zoroastrian priests and astrologers, coming to visit Jesus at the time of his birth.

In any case, there is something wonderful about this story of the wise men, a baby and a star. It charms us. Hopefully it will challenge and change us as well. The story of the Magi could be seen as the “last hurrah” of the holiday season – or the first step on our Epiphany faith journey.

This story in Matthew 2 is first of all a story about the *beckonings* of God. By means of a new and strange star in the sky, wise men were summoned by God to leave their established pattern and style of life and set out on a pilgrimage.

How about you? Did you see the star? The Christmas star in the sky recently? Some astronomers believe such a conjunction of the planets could have been the star the wisemen saw that led them to Bethlehem and the baby Jesus. Isn't that the practical result of Christmas and Epiphany after all? A new reality that brings with it new faith, hope and direction? We all need that after last year.

Today God calls us to follow the star – a star that can enrich our lives, and bring hope to the world. The star can be like an internal compass that guides you successfully through life. It is your true north, and represents who you are at your deepest level.

Have you looked to the stars lately for God's sign and direction? What star is God calling you to follow? Perhaps you have been too busy to notice the stars. Or perhaps it has been too cloudy and overcast on your landscape to see the stars because of your

worries and anxieties. Sometimes it takes a place of quiet ... and time to reflect in order to discern the star on your spiritual horizon so that you, like the Magi, can follow the star to the Christ child.

It's hard to tell how long the wise man studied the stars until God's answer came. They would have had a keen knowledge of astronomy. The Wise Men saw a star—it beckoned them—and they followed. They knew enough to notice a bright star that was unexpected and out of place. They knew God was calling them, and so they brought gifts to the baby Jesus.

Others surely saw the same star, but did not understand the significance for history and their lives. By a strange series of events, the wisemen became the first non-Jewish believers to fall to their knees, and worship the baby Jesus. The kings paid homage to the King and Lord of their lives. It all happened because they had the faith to follow the star to where God was leading them.

We miss a lot when we do not look for the star, or when we choose not to follow the star that bears our name and unique destiny. Sometimes we fail to see the star. We fail to see the star sometimes when we get discouraged. We fail to see the star when we're overwhelmed and under a lot of stress. We may fail to see the star when the burdens we carry become so heavy that our shoulders and heads are literally weighted down and bent over towards the ground, and we cannot look up to the sky.

Sometimes the dark night -- be it in the sky or in our souls -- is so black and thick that it engulfs us like a dense fog, and we are unable to find our way home. We become lost in the night. I don't know what darkness you are struggling with right now. You might be experiencing what Thomas Merton called "the dark night of the soul."

For others it might be the darkness of a broken relationship or a lost job... and they wonder if they'll ever feel whole again. For others it might be the darkness of struggling to live into the future when they don't have a job, or they're fearful of what the future may hold during these uncertain economic times. For many it is the dark struggle with covid, having suffered with the illness or are caring for a loved one. There is the darkness of the so called "longhaulers," who have recovered, but still struggle to resume their life.

God's promise still holds: There will be enough light to light your way, and illumination from the stars on your road. Hold on to the light. The light of the world has come to us, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. It shines for you and me.

God appoints to each of us a star. It may be a star that only you can see, that has your name written uniquely upon it. That star may be calling you to release a burden you

have carried for years. The star may be calling you to renew your relationship with God. May you have the wondrous sense of the star that is leading you to the stable and the baby Jesus once again.

Maybe this is the year that he will be born in new ways in you. The faith to follow a star can give you the courage to make tough decisions, knowing that God is with you. It could be like a decision like when to change a job, or finding clarity on a matter that has perplexed.

Like the Magi, we need wise women and men who are able to recognize God's purpose and take calculated risks in order to reach their destination. In W.H. Auden's Christmas Oratorio: For the Time Being, the wise men speak of why they left their wives and families, their books, their dogs, their food, and their security: "To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow the star." This too we share with the magi: the need to discover in 2021 how to be fully human and more Christ-like.

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We start the New Year at the table – the table of the Lord's Supper that can give us strength and hope for the year ahead. I don't know any better way to start. Just like the wisemen, we need to prepare for the journey ahead, wherever your star may lead. You will need the strength the Lord's table provides.

I read somewhere that on communion plates used in the early church there was engraved a star . . . the wisemen's star. It was placed there to show how the star leads those who would be wise to Christ's presence.

In the year 2021, may the star point the way to an end to the pandemic that has gripped the world. May the star mean a successful vaccine that is there for all those who want it. May the star give hope to so many millions of Americans who lost their financial footing in the past year, and the many small businesses that have struggled or closed. May the star bring hope to those who found themselves evicted from their homes, or did not have enough food to eat. May the star bring peace among nations. May the star bring hope to all who have struggled, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Look for the star, within and without. The star creates space for God's self-revelation. It's less about what's going on in our heads and more about what's happening in our hearts. There is no end to the ways in which God reveals and makes himself or herself known in our lives. It means there is a star guiding, leading, and drawing us to the child in every circumstance or situation we face. God is continually going before us, preparing places of divine presence for us to enter. In these places God is revealed and available to us.

I started out by talking about the Epiphany – the epiphany of Christ’s light in our lives and in the world. The Epiphany of Christ is not limited by time or geography. It is as real today as it was in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago. Throughout our life we journey, following the star from one place, and one revelation to the next.

Don’t just settle for what the wise men saw. Go look for yourself. Look into the sky, and look into yourself, and ask as the wisemen did, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Ask the question. Follow the star. Open your life. Give God the opportunity to say, “Look! Right here, right here in the middle of your life, here is the child who has been born king of the Jews.” It’s in the stars, and it’s in you and me. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

60:2 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.

60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

60:4 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.

60:5 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.

60:6 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

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 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."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 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.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.