

“Reflections on a Star”

Matthew 2:1-12

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We do not often have the opportunity in a Sunday morning worship to explore the beauty of the Epiphany. The meaning of the day often comes from two different church traditions. One is that there is an appearing of a star that reveals the messiah child who would become a shepherd king. It is framed by the story of the Magi from the East bearing gifts which appear to be of symbolic interest. The other is a tradition that focuses attention on Jesus’s baptism in the river Jordan. That, too, is a revelation: Jesus Christ is the son of God, in whom God is well pleased. In both cases the emphasis is on God making God’s purpose known to the world through Jesus, the divine son.

This year’s readings in the New Testament are divided respectively. Today we have the story of the Magi. Next week, we could visit the second emphasis by reading the story of the Baptism of the Lord. So, today, then, we get to talk about the Star of Bethlehem, or the Star in the East, or the Christmas star. I’ll have to admit that singing “We Three Kings from Orient Are” has waxed old with me and I take a deep breath every time someone tells me we are singing it. On the other hand, I love the beauty, the mystery, and the hope the story brings as told by Matthew. This story, in our best understanding affirms that people outside the boundaries of the Jewish community were also included in the gospel. As one writer put it, “[They] were not only the recipients and beneficiaries of divine revelation, but eagerly responded at no small expense to themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

We all know the story, I think. Although, the western tradition has embellished some parts of the story while emphasizing Herod’s chicanery way too much for me. If we take the story as the only as Matthew offers it, then we too can be caught up in the moment with the characters under the stars at night above Bethlehem. And, we have left some parts of the story un-cast. For example, did you notice in the reading that all Jerusalem was troubled by the events and that Herod made it a point to check out things with “all then ruling scribes and priests” among the people. They were the ones who gave the inside information to Herod. The narrator tells us that it was they who said the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill a prophesy. Only then, did Herod summon the wise men to unknowingly become caught up in his sinister plot.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wiki.faithfutures.org/index.php?title=Epiphany> (accessed January 5, 2019).

I need not tell you that the Magi entered the house where Jesus was with his family. No one is sure is how long exactly after Jesus was born that they arrived, but at least the scriptures do not say anything about the Magi arriving at a manger.

Whatever you have thought about the “Story of the Magi” over the years, it would be a good idea to add to your knowledge. Matthew is not the first one to imagine a group of wise guys coming from the East to Jerusalem. In Isaiah 60, one of our alternative readings for the day, there is a poem of hope to the Jews who had come back to the devastation of what was once the great Jerusalem. The poets did not write about the despair of the devastation but the hope, no the glory of a light that would appear over the new Jerusalem. The Lord, as has always been the reality, would be their rescuer, their restorer, their redemption. Those generations of Jews who had been in captivity told that story to the people of the East, who in time responded to an inner calling to bring gifts, to travel afar, to be awash in the mystery, to be astounded by the heavenly light, and to participate in God’s purpose for the ages.

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,<sup>[a]</sup>  
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.

<sup>7</sup> All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you,  
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;  
they shall be acceptable on my altar,  
and I will glorify my glorious house.

But wait. What we read from Isaiah is off-set by what Matthew said. The scribes and rulers do not recall a bright new Jerusalem as the seat of the throne from Isaiah's poetry. Rather they point to prophesy of the rural preacher Micah. Not Jerusalem but Bethlehem. The theologian Walter Bruggeman lightheartedly notes that for all the travel the Magi did guided by the star they still missed the place where Jesus was by NINE miles. That's how far it was from Herod's palace to Bethlehem of Judea. And, he notes, what difference would it have made for Herod, and the Wise men, had the scribes and rulers were satisfied to offer the poem of Isaiah for the answer to Herod's question.

That, friends, is why we need to re-visit this story from time to time. First, because God's work of redemption has been ongoing since ancient times as we learn from the Magi's story. Second, that the way we might arrange for history to play out in a certain way, or place, or time, may not at all be what God has had in mind all along. Third, that a knowledge of God's word is always a powerful tool for understanding the times we live in and for how we can seek God where God may be found across vast spaces of time and space. Fourth, the story of the Magi reminds us that we all play a role in some way in the complex story of humanity and God's grace. At one time or another we are scribes and priests, overbearing privileged citizens, travelers far away from home, people who live in modest surroundings who among us, and in our neighborhood, are the places where the Christ child has already been living among us.

So, on this twelfth day of Christmas, how far off are you from where you thought you would be this many days after Christmas? Have you somehow become stuck in your own quandary about which way to go from December 25 or have you made the adjustment to go the distance to the humble home where Jesus awaits your visit?