

Matthew 2  
Guidance and Mystery  
January 5, 2020 Epiphany  
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The first song I remember learning, even before “Jesus Loves Me,” was “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” The lyrics, I’ve learned, are based on a poem written by 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet, Jane Taylor, which was titled, “The Star.”

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
How I wonder what you are!  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.*

I kind of like the fact that, unlike the Schoolhouse Rock kind of songs, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” doesn’t try to teach us that a star is a ball of gas, held together by gravity. I feel like that wouldn’t translate well musically. As a child, I was content to *wonder*. In fact, I kind of liked the mystery of stars. It allowed me to make up my own stories about them. I believed every star led to somewhere and when I got older, I could pick a star and follow it any time I was up for an adventure. I questioned the wisdom of the adults in my life who were old enough to follow stars and clearly chose not to.

Did you know there are four more verses to Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star? The one I like the best is the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse:

*Then the trav’ler in the dark,  
Thanks you for your tiny spark,  
He could not see which way to go,  
If you did not twinkle so.*

I feel like this verse definitely supports my childhood theory that all stars lead to somewhere. My experience of most things I wondered about as a child is that very often, once I learned about them, how they really worked or what they were really made of, they seemed less magical, less *wonderful*. For some reason, stars have maintained their wonder and mystery, even to the point that I cannot resist making a wish when I see a shooting star.

The Epiphany story found in Matthew 2 begins with a star and a decision to follow where it led. The ones who followed the star were magi, not wise men, not kings. They were astrologers and dream interpreters, dabbling in the mysterious and wonderful. Nearly every reference to magi in surviving Israelite texts suggests the Israelites thought magi were foolish, definitely not wise, not noble. It is very likely that recipients of Matthew's gospel -- most of whom were Israelite Christians -- would have heard this story as an almost comical, puzzling tale, about a bunch of silly astrologers who were led by a star and actually found something important for a change.

Where did the star lead them? It led the magi past a king who was so afraid of one child that he was willing to kill them all. It led them past the religious leaders who always seemed to find themselves on the inside, devoted to keeping others out. The star led them past the wealthy elite who held tightly to what was theirs, while their neighbors suffered. And the star led the magi past the soldiers who kept the peace by using violence and coercion. Past all of them they walked until, at last, the star led them to something. The magi, strangers in a strange place, found themselves in the presence of a poor, vulnerable, child and when they looked in his eyes, they saw God.

The star led them past everything that was wrong in the world to a child full of potential to make it right. The world needed that child. If we were reading this story for the first time, we might be on the edge of our seats, for we know enough about the way the Roman Empire worked to know that the magi's act of resistance in not returning to Herod with a full report would have had consequences.

History is full of stories of human beings, individually and collectively, who have had to make difficult and risky decisions in response to injustice in many forms including unjust directives framed as required cooperation, 'for the good of the country.' Resistance can take many forms: Dissent, protest, civil disobedience. Sometimes, though, what the magi did is exactly what needs to be done. Sometimes we should simply decline to participate.

<https://sojo.net/articles/when-wise-men-refused-collaborate-empire>

Last year on Epiphany, like many of you, I was gifted with a star word. My star word was FREEDOM. At first, I was luke-warm to FREEDOM, thinking that,

compared to so many other people, FREEDOM is something that is abundant in my life. The fact that I am white, educated, heterosexual, and cisgender has come with a significant amount of privilege that translates to FREEDOM in a lot of situations. But, as 2019 unfolded, I began to realize that there were things in my life from which I did need to be liberated, like an unhealthy relationship with food and the need to be perfect, which manifests itself in ways that affect my mental health and overall wellness.

FREEDOM has also reminded me that it comes with a lot of responsibility. I am FREE to refuse to participate in that which I believe conflicts with the ways of God...and I should. I will not condone violence and war while diplomacy sits on the sidelines. I am FREE to use my voice to draw attention to the ways in which this nation is inflicting trauma on innocent children by keeping them separate from their parents, housing them in reprehensible conditions, and allowing fear and racism to drive our immigration policies...and I must. FREEDOM, like so many things in life, means nothing until it is used for the good of others. In 2019, I tried to live into the truth in Galatians 5:13, "You were called to freedom, siblings; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love."

The story of Epiphany reminds us that God and Love are for everyone (strangers from afar, resisters, new parents, brave refugees, children, anyone who has ever been left out), And Light, especially from stars, is meant to be followed.

In the west the sky was bright with stars and the young woman stayed up late, baking bread. As she waited for the dough to rise, she went to the door and combed her hair, singing a song about the moonlight. Suddenly she stopped. Far away in the east there was a new star, brighter than all the rest. It was so bright that it bathed the woman's kitchen in star-shine. The beams from the star shone right onto the dough. The woman stared in disbelief---the dough was rising, as it filled with starlight. She was afraid to touch it at first, but it was quite firm and ready to be baked. So, she cooked it in the oven. "As soon as it is ready," she said to herself, "I shall take the star-bread and travel east. I must find where the great light is coming from."

Way down in the south, where countries are hotter, another woman sat up late at night, rocking her child. He was cutting a tooth and could not sleep. His mother hummed to him and loved him with words that no one else could understand. "Shall Mama get you the moon, sweet baby?" she crooned, taking her child out into the night to find a breeze. "I could cut you a piece of mango to cool your poor mouth."

The young child stretched his fat little arms to the moon, and his mother laughed. Then they saw a strange sight---a bright new star rising in the northeast. Starlight shown on the child's face, making him smile. His mother watched in silence. Her heart filled with desire to leave her village and follow the bright star.

Far away in the southeast an old woman was telling stories to her grandchildren by the dying light of a cooking fire. Their mothers sat resting for the first time that day, while the old woman spoke of tigers and monkeys and temples and snakes and lotus flowers.

But gradually the story began to change and suddenly there was a star in it... "Just like that star up there in the northwest," said the old woman. "Then what happened, Grandma?" the children prompted her, for she had stopped in mid story and was gazing at the star till it filled her mind. And all the children hushed and gazed with her, forgetting the story they had been listening to and wanting a new one full of silver starlight.

What was it about that star? There was something different about it that drew all three women from their homelands; and something the same that said to each of them, "Follow me."

They met on a path of starlight, not knowing how long or how far they had traveled. They were not hungry or thirsty or tired, so each supposed her journey had been short. They found themselves on a dusty road at midnight, where the sky was a deep dark blue and the moon a fingernail of mother-of-pearl. Each woman looked toward her own bright star that seemed to stand still over a huddle of houses. "The end of our journey," said the grandmother. "Let me carry your baby for a while," said the young woman to the mother. And they all walked together through the hills, past sleeping shepherds, down to the town.

The star stayed where it was, growing ever bigger and brighter. It threw down great white spears of starlight onto a small white building with a thatched roof.

The young woman started when she saw people coming out of the building, and gave the baby back to his mother. They all watched as men in fine robes, and their servants, mounted on camel and rode away.

“Others have followed the star before us,” said the mother. Suddenly all three women were afraid. “We have come so far,” said the young woman. “We must go inside.”

They ducked their heads under the low door beam and looked in. It was just a stable with horses and donkeys. But it was also a home for a new family, a man and a woman and a newborn child all bathed in starlight, so that all the golden straw was silver. And yet there was gold, a whole heap of it by the baby’s makeshift crib, and other rich presents too---but nothing was as rich or as bright as the glow surrounding the baby.

“Come in,” said the new mother, and the women entered quietly. Their hearts were full. They too wanted to give presents. They told the baby’s mother how they had left their homes drawn by the star, with no more than the bundles they carried. They had traveled by star-path and moonlight, hardly knowing how they got there.

The young woman took the loaf of star-bread from her bundle. It was still warm and smelled fresh. She gave it to the baby’s mother and, although he was too young to eat it, the baby touched the loaf, as if to bless it.

The grandmother said, “I have nothing in my bundle to give the child, but I would like to tell him a story.” Then the three women sat in the straw with the new family and the grandmother told a story full of starlight and hope.

All this time, the mother from the south held her sleeping baby, and her heart was pounding, for he was all she had to give. Although she was filled with a strange new love for the baby in the crib, her own child was as dear to her as life itself.

When the story ended, her child awoke. Right away he saw the baby and held out his arms to him. The two mothers held their sons and the child gave the baby a kiss full of starlight. His mother sighed and held her child tight. There had been a present after all.

The three wise women left the stable and walked the paths the star had made to lead them home. When they got back to their villages, no one noticed that they had been away. And no one remembered the star.

But the star-baby in the stable never forgot the women and their three presents. When he grew up, he showed that fresh-baked loaves taste even better when they are shared. He told the most wonderful stories to anyone who would listen. And the man whose birth had been marked by a new star taught the whole world that the greatest gift of all is love.

*Three Wise Women*, by Mary Hoffman, pictures by Lynne Russell

Today we will all receive the gift of a new star. I hope you will join me and follow the Light wherever it leads. Amen.