

January 2, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany

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I was born in 1966, 3 years before Neal Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon in July of 1969. In light of this, it is no surprise that going to space was something my classmates and I talked a lot about in those days. It was in our Scholastic Readers, on the evening news, and grown-ups were talking about all the time. Space and rockets and the possibility of discovering who knows what fed our active imaginations and many of us grew up dreaming of being astronauts someday.

To be clear, I didn't ever want to actually go to space. My adventuresome spirit has limits. But a fascination with the night sky has been constant in my life. I love a big, bright full moon, watching shooting stars, and waiting outside for a meteor shower. I enjoy looking at the constellations and feeling small in comparison to vastness of space.

This may be why I've always been a bit taken with today's story that features, not only a mysterious star rising, but some equally mysterious followers of that star. These star followers have been identified as wise men, kings, and magi. Some traditions have even given them names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. One popular legend has portrayed Caspar as a king of India, Melchior as a king of Persia (modern day Iran), and Balthazar as a king of Arabia. But the key word there is "legend."

Scholars believe the visitors the author wrote about were followers of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world and is still active in Iran today. It was the official religion of Persia before Islam. The word Magi is derived from the Greek word magoi, which meant priests from Persia. In truth, the visitors were neither kings nor wise men. Perhaps they earned the title wise men because of their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology, though it is doubtful only men were in this group. Caravans from Persia often included women practitioners of this religion as well. They were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor.

There are some similarities between Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity. First, it is certain that a belief in a messiah was a cardinal tenant for Zoroaster, the primary prophet for Zoroastrianism. In addition, Zoroastrians believe that Zoroaster was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. Like Jesus, Zoroaster started his ministry at the age of 30 after he defeated all Satan's temptations. He predicted that "other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded." Zoroastrian priests believed they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. So, when this mysterious star appeared in the sky, off they went.

This is Matthew 2:1-12.

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

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.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Our nativity sets like to conflate Luke's story of Jesus's birth with this story. I'm curious...How many of you have nativity sets that feature the Magi? Here's the thing, in the author of Matthew's story, Jesus had to have been at least two years old. Otherwise, in the verses that follow this text, fearful King Herod would not have ordered the death of all children under two. Plus, it would have taken quite some time for the Magi to travel from Persia to Bethlehem. They couldn't have just hopped the red eye on Southwest.

But Matthew's story is not meant to be an historical account. It is meant to make a very specific theological point. Jesus's birth was the revelation of God in this world and that revelation was for everyone, people for whom his birth was good news and bad news, people who were Jewish and people who were not, ordinary people and kings. The good news of God's love is for everyone, even if they choose not to hear it as good news.

In Matthew's story, the Magi, eagerly waiting for their own messiah in Persia, saw the star in the sky and followed it. When they arrived in Bethlehem and found Jesus, they decided he must be the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. Jesus is presented as the expected King of the Jews *and* the Gentiles, the Messiah for whom they had all been waiting. It is a bit odd that the Zoroastrian messiah would be found in Bethlehem, but it was imperative for the Jewish messiah to be born there. First, it was important to draw a distinction between the King of the Jews and other kings. Rome was the seat of political power and where one would expect to find a king, but Jesus was not like Caesar and he certainly did not bow to him. Second, Micah, an 8th century Hebrew Bible prophet predicted the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days (Micah 5:2). This should sound familiar. Matthew quotes Micah in verse 6 of today's reading.

The Gospel of Matthew was written for a community that existed more than a generation after Jesus's death. This community had fully expected that Jesus would have returned, and the oppressive Roman Empire would have been toppled. Matthew's story was written to encourage the people, to give them hope, and reassure them that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah...even the Zoroastrians recognized that, according to the story. The community could and should believe God had indeed come in the person of Jesus, and they could fully

rely on God's promises. They would not live under the thumb of a Roman king forever. Better days were coming. The oppressive world they knew would finally be turned upside-down.

In a lot of ways, we are still waiting for the upside-down world for which Matthew's community was hoping. There are still far too many people who are oppressed. There is far too much distance between the ones with the financial means to take care of their families and the ones without. I mean...there are people taking trips into space, pretending to be astronauts, while their neighbors have no shelter, or can't access healthcare or feed their families. Even our government, which is by no means an oppressive regime on the scale of the Roman Empire, does not seem to be working for its people at times. People all over our country feel forgotten as soon as the elections are over. So, what does this ancient story have to say to us today?

One thing it tells us is that the story of Jesus has the potential to be a story for everyone...if we tell it right. This story was not meant to be a historically accurate representation of a single event, but a metaphor for the ways in which the Holy is revealed, not just to us, but to all people. Unlike the bright star the Magi followed, the light for our paths does not always shine brightly in the night sky. Sometimes it shines through grandmas, children, friends, professors, sunrises, and even ancient stories.

I wonder if we might try to be more like the Magi and be attuned to the "stars" in our lives and to the ways in which they point us toward the Holy. I encourage you this week, to celebrate Epiphany at home (on January 6th) as you consider, "Who or what, in your life, has revealed God to you? Who or what has shown you something new about yourself, your neighbor, or God?" Revelations like that are the heart of Epiphany. But so often, they happen so quickly, or we are so busy, we don't pay much attention to them. Or maybe you are at a point in your journey where LOVE seems allusive, or your heart is weighed down with trauma and it's felt that way for so long, the idea of something new breezing in seems far-fetched.

Wherever you are on the journey and however you feel today, Epiphany has a gift for you. This gift is meant as a guide to encourage us to notice God in our lives and to inspire us to be curious about the world around us, ourselves, our

neighbors, and certainly the Creator of it all. In her book, *How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, artist Jenny Odell, writes, “Curiosity, something we know most of all from childhood, is a forward-driving force that derives from the differential between what is known and not known. Even morbid curiosity assumes there is something you haven’t seen that you’d like to see, creating a kind of pleasant sensation just around the corner...Practices of attention and curiosity are inherently open-ended, oriented toward something outside ourselves.”¹ I would like to suggest that the “something outside ourselves” that we orient ourselves toward in 2022 could be God.

Epiphany’s gift to all of us is our 2022 Star Word. Each word is different, and your word is meant especially for you. Star Words are an invitation to make a spiritual practice, time for connection with the Holy, a part of each day and you can do that however and whenever you choose. It is an invitation to notice what has been here along, but has been invisible to us, like when your friend gets a new Jeep and suddenly you notice that a lot of people drive Jeeps. Your Star Word is an invitation to “go where no man has gone before,” and see where the Light is leading you.

One person who received a star word last year shared this with me: *Last year my star word was hospitality. I thought it was hilarious because 1) COVID and 2) I’ve always felt I was pretty good at hosting and being hospitable. So, I worked on being hospitable to myself. To welcoming my whole self and taking care of myself as I would someone else. I stood up for myself in new ways this year. And I gave myself new grace. This is the second star word in a row that profoundly changed my life. I am still continually working on my first one: sacred. I look forward to this year’s word.*

One of the ways I have chosen to engage my star word in the past is to journal a one sentence reflection based on my word every day. In 2021, my word was covenant. Here are two of my journal entries:

*Covenants exist, even when they are not acknowledged, just ask God.
The work of being in covenant is real work that often goes unseen.*

¹ Odell, Jenny, *How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, Melville House Publishing: Brooklyn, NY, 2019, p. 103.

I, too, have eagerly awaited the gift of the 2022 Star Words. And...the wait is over!
Happy Epiphany!

I invite you to come forward while we sing and either draw your own star word from the basket or indicate that you would like me to draw it. Your gift awaits!