

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 1.6.19, Matthew 2:1-12, Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12  
Sermon Resources: <https://marciglass.com/2013/01/04/starward/>

It may seem astonishing that we're still talking about elements of the Christmas story, but since our Christmas here in Natchitoches starts about mid-November, and liturgically the Christmas season continues through today, it makes for a long Christmas season, but it is, indeed, still the Christmas season. In Matthew's gospel, there are no shepherd visits or heavenly hosts, but there are these magi, wise men, coming from the East. And they travel, following the light of an important star, which they know represents the birth of the King of the Jews, but what they don't know is exactly where he is. So, they go to what should have been the likeliest place for a king—King Herod's palace—and ask there. And our text tells us that Herod was frightened by this news, by these magi asking for directions, by their determination to pay these new king homage. Frightened of the threat this new king will be to him. But he plays it cool, when the chief priests and scribes confirm the story and say 'oh yes this new king is to be born in bethlehem', King Herod says 'go on and find him and then come tell me where he is, so, I...can also go...y'know...pay him homage'. So the magi go, and they find Jesus with his parents, and they give him, what, at first, seem like strange gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. They are filled with joy and they worship. On their way back, however, a dream warns them about Herod's deceit, that there is no good to come of telling him where Jesus is, and they go home by an entirely different way, bypassing Herod.

Our prophecy from Isaiah tells us that kings shall come to the brightness of the light who has come into the world. This is exactly what the magi did. They followed the brightness of a star, the light of Jesus Christ reflected in the sky above,

they followed that light to his light which had come into the world. It was a long journey, it was a strange journey, it was a journey without turn by turn navigation, with uncertainty and exploration, but they knew they were heading the right way because of the light in the sky, which reflected the light who had come into the world.

And just like in both Isaiah and our Psalm readings, when they followed that light, they brought abundance to this light, the wealth of the nations, they brought gold and frankincense and myrrh, they rendered him tribute, they brought him gifts. They fell down before him in worship, and their hearts thrilled and rejoiced and they praised and worshiped. Because here was the person they had been searching for, the truest king, the culmination of their journey and their searching, the light come into the world.

But even though they knew some of what the star meant, and they prepared for a king, they didn't know everything. A lot of this process was a mystery. They were only following a star in the sky, which gave some direction, but not the kind of super clear, specific "Turn right at the walgreens and if you get to the gas station you've gone too far" kind of directions. When they encountered Jesus, (probably as a toddler, not as a baby, but still), this probably didn't seem like The King, the light of the whole world, someone who would call forth the nations, that other kings would worship. Maybe they didn't even know exactly what their gifts would be used for, as they traveled, as they wondered, as they worshiped.

Earlier I told you today was still the Christmas season, which it is, but it is also the day of Epiphany (some churches, like the Catholic church, or the Episcopal church, celebrate a season of Epiphany—we're Presbyterian, so we don't do that, but you feel free to on your own time), and the word Epiphany in Greek means appearing, brightness, manifestation, revealing. The day of Epiphany, and the season, in other traditions, is a time to tell stories and celebrate times that Jesus

appears and is revealed in all his brightness, all his glory, that he reveals who he truly is: in this case, a king.

The magi were searching for a king, and a lot of it was a mystery, but like Paul says in our Ephesians passage, that mystery is revealed and made known, by a star. They didn't know what kind of king, didn't know exactly how their gifts would be used by this king, didn't know exactly to whom they were being guided, but the star stopped over the place where the Christ child was, and then the mystery was revealed, Jesus was revealed, they knew the king, they knew to whom to give their gifts, it was revealed.

The gospel text implies for us that it wasn't easy for the people living under King Herod. In our text for today, it records that Herod is afraid, and therefore, all Jerusalem is afraid with him. And he goes on to make them even more afraid, with even more brutal policies. We know that after this story is recording the infamous and horrifying "massacre of the innocents", wherein Herod orders the death of every child under age two. His reaction, and therefore, all Jerusalem's reaction, to the news of a king, of a light come into the world, is to be afraid. To panic. To try and stop its coming, and block its way and drive it out.

Imagine if, instead of their fear, in their panic, in those difficult times, that the people, had looked up at the star. The star which was guiding, which would show them a way to use their gifts and know a king, a star which would reveal mysteries to them. What might have been found and been revealed, if they, too, had noticed, if they, too, had looked up, if they, too, had followed and worshiped and been filled with joy, instead of being afraid?

The band Over the Rhine's, song, "Another Christmas" contains these lyrics: "Cause we've committed every sin/And each one leaves a different scar/It's just the world we're living in/And we could use a guiding star". This world we're living in, a world of our personal sin, our collective sin, our collective fear and panic

and drive to keep out that which troubles us and block what's new, the way we stifle compassion and kindness, the way we justify the poor treatment of other people, the way we are scarred and leave scars on the earth and on each other, like the people in Jerusalem, we live in difficult times, and we are afraid and we could use a guiding star. We could use a star lighting the way, guiding, leading us to where our gifts are best used, leading us to truly know Jesus, leading us to mysteries revealed.

Well, I couldn't get a real star for you, although certainly I'd encourage us to look up and be amazed every night. But it's becoming tradition in some churches each new year to do "Star Words", which we will do today. And while they are pre-prepared words, I have taken the time to pray over these words, hoping that they would go to the right person, that the star you find leads you, and guides you, and through God's power, reveals more to you this year. These aren't new year's resolutions, they aren't quick fixes. They are words meant to be pondered in our hearts, like Mary, to be studied and reflected on, like the Magi, to guide us and reveal new things to us through close attention, like that star of Bethlehem, to take us out of our fear and difficulties of this world and scars of sin and lead us to greater worship of Jesus. So I'm going to have each of you take a star with its word, and it is yours for this year. Put it somewhere you can see it regularly, where you can ponder it, where it will stick in your head and you'll remember when you see something that connects, that reveals something to you. And don't go digging around too long for the word you like, sometimes the word you don't like, if you're able to look up and let go of the fear, might offer you more than you can imagine.

As you hold these stars, imagine what they and the word written there, might lead us to, what they might reveal for us in the coming year, what they might reveal in us as people of faith, how they might show us ways to use our gifts that we

never anticipated before, how they might show us ways to use our gifts for Jesus Christ, and know him better as our light and our Savior.

Like the magi, let's follow the star. Let's follow the light of Jesus Christ, which has come into the world, and let's offer our gifts and ourselves and our fear and our uncertainty over to this holy mystery. Let's watch carefully and attentively for what may be revealed this year, let's watch for how our gifts can be used, and where our Savior is present. Let's be people of wonder, of mystery, of faithful searching. Let's be people who offer our gifts, and fall down in worship, and follow the star and the light of Jesus Christ, this year. Amen.