

2024-01-07

A Star Word

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
 and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
 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.
 Nations shall come to your light,
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

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.
 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.
 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

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

"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." '

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

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

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and bottle of wine, they pitch a tent, retire for the night and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend.

“Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

“I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes,” replies Watson.

“And what do you deduce from that?”

Watson ponders for a minute. “Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe. What does it tell you, Holmes?” “Elementary, my dear Watson!” he says. “Someone has stolen our tent!”

Q: Why didn't the Dog Star laugh at that joke? A: It was too Sirius.

Let us pray: God of Light, be our guiding star through the shadowy areas of our lives, and shine through us so that we, too, might be guides for others along the way. Amen.

Receiving a Star Word at the beginning of the year is a practice of churches of many denominations across the world. Some congregations all receive the same word-of-the-year, where others, like ours today, receive words with maybe 2 or 3 repetitions. You are invited to keep your star word in your wallet, on the fridge, on your bathroom mirror, nightstand, desk or another place where you will see it frequently. The intent of the Star Words that you received this morning is that this word will accompany you through the year. You may not like your word today – but it will have a different meaning for you at Easter or in the summer, or next Thanksgiving. Your Star Word will be a resource for you in your reflections, your growing edges, and your celebrations, and it will accompany you in your conversations with God and your community here. Maybe as you reflect on your word through the year, you will find it to be a blessing of grace, a reminder, a puzzle, a challenge, a dream... the point is that it is a place to start. It is a jumping off place for new thoughts and a new perspective – a new light to shine on life.

One of the fun things about Star Words is that our individuality as well as our commonality inform our interpretations of the words. My guess is that even if all of us received the same word, we would each interpret that word differently. We have filters and lenses that color and shape how we see, hear and speak these words.

The thing you may already know about interpreting is that it is not simply a matter of exchanging information word by word. The subtleties of culture, inflection and context are part of the translation. When Ron or Sarah or Rachel or Sonia are translating between English and Spanish, they are translating U.S. culture in one direction, just as Spanish speakers are translating their own settings to us. There will never be total mutual understanding, but that should not stop us from asking and responding, no matter how much or little we know of the language!

In our gospel lesson in Matthew, the wise men, a.k.a. Magi, or Kings, or Zoroastrian priests, or Astrologers, or ForeignTravelers were primarily interpreters. They interpreted the

signs in the sky, and they interpreted dreams, all of which equipped people for the future. Their lenses of interpretation were particularly wise, so they were well known. In this gospel story, they made an interpretation of a particular new star. The star and its interpretation became their guide as they journeyed along with their questions. (just as I hope your Star Word will be for you!) Being interpreters, one can imagine that the gifts the wise men brought were also symbolic guides for reflection.

The elements of gold and frankincense were well known from the Isaiah prophecies, as Barb read for us this morning. But Isaiah only mentions the gold and frankincense. The third element mentioned in the gospel of Matthew, myrrh, calls us to look at all three gifts differently. The New Testament inclusion of a third gift changes the *interpretation*. Myrrh was used for healing; it was also used to prepare bodies for burial. Putting all three of these gifts together in the story may have been a clue to the insight the foreign visitors had about the baby, Jesus, or it may have been the gospel writer's, Matthew's, interpretation of the future for Jesus. In either case, the point to be made is that even at a tender age, there was a foreshadowing of his exalted human status (the gold), a foreshadowing of his divine status (the incense of worship), and a foreshadowing of his healing abilities and his death (the myrrh.) This interpretation shed new light on the identity of the child, and set him apart to be the Light of the World.

The magi (or magicians or people of wisdom) that came from the East to see the newborn king of the Jews had been looking in the sky for a sign or a change that would bring a sense of hope to the world. Honestly, I'm not sure how it was that they translated "hey look, it's a new star" into "hey look, that star is a sign of the birth of the King of the Jews." And if that star were leading them to Jesus the king, it would have led them to Bethlehem. But there they were at the beginning of our reading, looking for him in Jerusalem. I guess it's not that unusual – we all look at Google Maps and say from time to time – THAT can't be right! And we go our own way based on our own knowledge, rather than following the electronic directions. Picture the magi – and there could have been dozens of them, I suppose – seeing as how there were 3 gifts, but no mention of how many people – traveling from the East with the huge entourage necessary for long distance travel. Picture them following the star, and realizing it was leading them away from Jerusalem. THAT can't be right! Kings are from city centers. Kings are leaders of religion and politics, therefore a king of the Jews must be found in Jerusalem. So rather than following the star that was in the lead, the magi went where they thought they should go – Jerusalem.

Look at the Star Word you received today. Is this a word that will lead you where you **want** to go? Or might it lead you where you **need** to go?

Back to Jerusalem. As far as the gospel writer, Matthew, tells us, the only ones who know that the birth of Jesus is a significant event in history are his parents and the shepherds abiding in their fields. It's not likely that the word would travel far from those sources. The only way that Herod, the pharisees, and the Jewish people would know that the King of the Jews had been born, was through these strangers. People from outside of their culture, outside their experience, outside what was expected – travelers from the East were the ones who first brought the good news. The magi were looking forward to meeting this new king and paying homage. This was unnerving to Herod! He was the only one that was to be paid any homage! The news of another king was quite threatening – so he lied and said, "why yes, I want to honor

him too. Let me know where he is.” Thank goodness the magi were wise, and never went back to tell him.

The religious rulers of Jerusalem told the Magi that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem – which must have been embarrassing, since the star was trying to get the magi to that small town all along. Despite their misdirection, eventually they were guided to the right road.

We can rest assured, that no matter what word you and I received today – whether it is a word that you would have picked yourself or one you get by chance – we will be directed and redirected through the year to get where we need to go. In order to do that, we must be open to listening to the wisdom of strangers and open to signs that may be unfamiliar.

You and I are likely to have a deeper encounter with Christ if we are seeking it diligently. We are more likely to have an epiphany, or an aha moment, if we have been studying what is ordinary, so we can recognize the extraordinary. God’s ability to bring light to the world is beyond what we know, beyond our imaginations, and beyond what **we** do. I trust your Star Word will be that kind of interpretation for you, just as the stars in the sky were interpreted by the magi.

Amen.