

Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV) ~ 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.

Surprise!

When our children were infants and young toddlers, we spent our summer vacations camping on our farm in northern New York State. Away from home and on a different time schedule, bedtimes were often quite challenging. In order to get the children to sleep, Birney and I would often carry them for walks out under the stars, and suggest that they gaze at “God’s night lights” in order to quiet their minds – for we were very far from the nearest street light. So comforting was this vacation-time star-gazing, that we eventually put some of the stick-up glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceilings of the kids’ bedrooms to provide an opportunity for indoor star-gazing. Then, it wasn’t long before Paul began begging to have his own telescope, so that he could get a closer look at the celestial lights that fascinated and comforted him so.

The Magi in today’s gospel story were star-watchers also, astrologers, probably teachers from a Persian Priestly caste. I look forward to reading this passage from Matthew after Christmas each year, for it seems to round out our Christmas celebration. Through this scripture reading, our nativity scene becomes complete as the Wise Ones arrive with their gifts. These star-watchers saw a brilliant star rise one night and knew that it signaled God’s intervention in the human family. Amazingly, they knew that God would send a Savior in infant form to be some kind of ruler of the people, but they knew not where this child would be born. So, they followed the star to find the Christ child.

In a day when most searches were carried out by daylight, without the benefit of electric lighting, it must have seemed odd that these Wise Ones could only travel at night, since it was a star that led them. Today, the GPS directions which we follow measure our traveling in miles, hours and minutes. Imagine setting out on a journey which would take months and years to complete! The Wise Ones knew that in order to view the full brightness of God’s revelation, they must journey through the darkness following the light.

So now it is Epiphany: the season of light, the season when we celebrate God being revealed to humanity in ways that will shatter the darkness of the sinful world. We celebrate with candles and twinkling lights, bright-lighted trees inside and outside our church and homes. Some are quick to extinguish the lights we associate with Christmas, often removing them from their homes just as this season of light is beginning! Why are we so quick to extinguish the light? Light exposes. Light reveals. Light announces. Light demands. One such light is a star. Another is the Christ, who when teaching reminded his hearers, *“I am the light of the world.”* **John 9:5** and then later, in **John 12:46**: *[Jesus said,] “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness.”*

In light and in dreams, God is revealed to us. When the Christmas lights are put away, God’s light remains. The sun, the moon, and all the stars stay in the sky. They are fixed and dependable; they are there to light our way, fascinating and comforting us in ways that only God can. These lights can serve as reminders of the constant presence of Almighty God in the midst of sickness, confusion, turmoil, doubt, and fear.

In these days, we celebrate light and we sing about stars in the sky: silent ones looking down on the manger, the place where Jesus lay. In Jesus’ birth, God is further revealed as a creator who desires to be among creation, and bring creation to its best – full salvation; eternal life. As with welcoming a babe, becoming *our* created best is joy-filled, and challenging; awe-inspiring, and demanding; impossible, yet filled with all possibility in faith. In these days, we celebrate the knowledge and thrill of Jesus’ birth. A star reminds us of all of this.

“Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight . . .” How many of us recited these words as we made a wish upon the first star seen at dusk. During the busy evenings ahead, may we take the time to look up at the stars: filled with mystery and mastery, comfort and awe. And may we remember the holy birth. For the twinkle of even the tiniest star gives hope to those seeking the light. Make a wish – or better yet, say a prayer for the comfort and joy of those lingering in the darkness. The star, the little light suspended in the darkness shines – and its brilliance, whether small or large, is constant. It is as though God is saying to us: *I am here. I am with you. I will lead the way. I have come so that you will know me. You are not alone.*

May each and every star remind you of our Savior, sent to be the Light of the world. May the mystery and the light of this season bring you closer to the Savior, the Light of life. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV) ~ 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 gathered 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.