

January 6, 2019

"Star Watch"

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Matthew 2:1-12

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; John 1:(1-9) 10-18

This news report just in from Jerusalem: "Three Middle Eastern men have been detained after they attempted to cross Israel's eastern border. It is unknown which Arab country they were from but border officials were suspicious noting they were traveling disguised as royal dignitaries and riding camels. Upon inspection of their bags they discovered the exotic items they had with them, gold, frankincense and myrrh, and suspected they were smuggling those items into the country illegally. The three men claimed they were not kings but were a team of astronomers doing research and following a star from the east. Authorities were skeptical of their claims they believed the star would lead them to a Jewish baby that had been born. Border guards also reported seeing a strange slow-moving light in the sky, likely that of an unknown secret military aircraft with hovering capabilities. This craft was observed by officials on the ground but strangely not detected by the Israeli military defense radar leading to a heightened concern that the craft was equipped with advanced stealth capabilities. This is Matthew reporting, more news on this story on *Nightly News* at 10."

Hmmm ... In reality, the Bethlehem of the Bible was really just a small village a few miles south of Jerusalem known more for being King David's place of birth than for anything else that may have happened since. It may have been a sleepy little town back then but things have changed with the urban sprawl of Jerusalem that now embraces it. In our time it has grown into a bustling Jerusalem suburb. The problematic issue now is that it's a part of the Arab West Bank sector and crossing back and forth from the Arab section to Jerusalem where there are jobs for those lucky enough to have them is rightly tense because of the vigilant presence of the Israeli army and a massive concrete wall separating Israel and Bethlehem. In the center of the town square is a large 4th century church built over the small cave many believe was a shepherd's cave where Jesus may have been born. In order to enter, you pass through a small entrance behind and below the chancel. Visitors must stoop to enter below the surface of the ground down into the cave where Jesus was born.

"Stooping and entering in silence" is a spiritual discipline whenever we go on pilgrimage with God. Where will our faith journey take us? So where does that leave us modern-day seekers? Maybe we're to follow the example of those Magi and to take hold of the Star that's leading us. Maybe we need to move into the future by moving out of the comfortable and the known and together to move into new ways

of service and mission. Maybe our calling is something that will become plainer once we take the first step under the logic that you have to tip over the first domino for the direction to appear. I think the first step demands we have a mysterious sense of the will of God. Great journeys are driven by purpose and direction and risk.

This church needs a fresh wind of the Spirit to breathe new life into us. And so, the question in front of us as a church is: "What is the will of God for us?" Perhaps it's the question for you as well. We need that kind of clarity as a church. We need to know who we are and where we are headed. Like those wandering Magi following the only light they had, they found themselves bringing gifts to an unlikely baby in an obscure little town where once a great Jewish King had been birthed.

How does Epiphany, the feast of the light, illuminate our worship with power and direction? As we read Matthew's account of the journey of the Magi to Jerusalem in search of the child born king of the Jews, we could refuse to be distracted by the aspects of Hebrew prophecy fulfilled or the astrological phenomenon of the star; instead we should take notice of the wise men's raw, unrestrained response—they worshiped.

Something amazing happened to the wise men. They had a moment of revelation, a transcendent experience of the divine, and they could not contain their joy. Biblical scholar Ron Goetz writes, "They had lost the composure and reserve of scholars and sages, giving way to an ecstasy of naked adoration."¹ That kind of unfiltered interpretation should cause us to wonder when was the last time that happened to us in worship? What would happen if it happened right here in our midst? What would happen if we followed our star and risked everything in doing so? On this good day of Epiphany, what star are you following, and what would God have you do in response to the great light shining? As we move to the Table, hear how theologian Howard Thurman described the challenge of this day:

*"When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among brothers, to make music in the heart."*²

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¹ Erin Martin, "Bowing Before His Brightness," *Christian Century*, 12/31/07, <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2007-12/bow-his-brightness>

² Excerpt from Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973