

“A New Direction”

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1-3-21 Epiphany Sunday

Based upon 1 Sam. 28:1-12, 15-19; Matt. 2:1-12

Did you see the Christmas Star this year? Actually, I guess I should say “Did you try to see it?” since the cloud cover made it difficult to see much from here, especially without a telescope. I tried and was disappointed when the weather didn’t cooperate. But I saw photos taken by those who live in the middle of the United States, who were able to glimpse the very rare planetary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn which was hyped in the news this year as “the Christmas Star” or “the Star of Bethlehem.” The planets came closer together in their orbits than they have been in the last 800 years, making it seem to the naked eye as if they had merged into one big shining light in the sky. Astronomers and biblical scholars have speculated for years that the original star of Bethlehem was actually this planetary conjunction or something like it. Since stars do not move, and the celestial light that the magi followed did, it has long been thought that what they saw was either a single conjunction of planets, or perhaps a series of them in the sky.

2020 was lousy enough to send even the most hard-core atheist looking for a little bit of holy mystery or some assurance of God’s presence, or both. So, I’m not really surprised that the prospect of seeing a glimpse of something that might have been the famous star had a lot of heads pointed toward the heavens for several days before Christmas. But I was interested by how little was said about what its reappearance might mean theologically. I mean, if the original star notified the magi of Jesus’ birth, what did people think it would mean if we were able to see the very same star again today? The star isn’t the star of the Christmas story, after all; it’s just a signpost in the sky pointing to the birth of God’s love incarnate in the world in Jesus. It stands to reason, therefore, that if we could see that exact same star again now, all these centuries later, either the one the magi saw 800 years ago wasn’t as special as we imagined, or it was, and we should be sitting up straight because God is trying to get our attention that way again. But I didn’t read or hear a lot of talk about either of these options. People just wanted to see the star, I guess, for the same reason they like to see celebrities, to say they had an encounter with someone, or in this case, something famous.

Whatever the star of Bethlehem was, the public reaction was quite different back when it first appeared. According to *Matthew*, the celestial event wasn’t news to anyone but the magi. When they showed up in Jerusalem, creating all kinds of problems by telling its paranoid and blood-thirsty ruler, Herod, that the stars proclaimed that a new king was being born, neither Herod nor his scribes seemed to know what they were talking about. They hadn’t been gazing at the heavens wondering if the star was a good or evil omen. This suggests that it was not a super bright and big orb, like in most pictures depicting the scene, but rather something that only people who were familiar with all the other stars in the sky would have noticed, people who, like the magi, made huge life decisions based upon what appeared to be written in the stars. Whether they were Zoroastrian priests as some think, magicians, or scientists, the consensus seems to be that the magi were star gazers. They believed so deeply that the stars could tell them what was going to happen that they left their home country and traveled for probably weeks or months to see the king the heavens announced was coming.

When I was young, I went through a phase of being obsessed with horoscopes. I didn't really believe that human fate was sealed in the stars or that every Capricorn born, like me, in January was destined to have the same kind of day each day. I was too much of a scientist to believe that. I just liked the high of seeing in writing the promise that something amazing could happen in my life: "Today could be the day you meet Prince Charming, or make a great discovery, or go on a trip." Once my horoscope started saying repeatedly, "You will or should work very hard today," which is the Capricorn horoscope 9 times out of 10, I lost interest.

But the magi were different. They didn't head to Jerusalem on a romantic flight of fancy, or because they were bored and wanted adventure. They believed what the mysterious star proclaimed would come true. That makes their presence in the birth narrative of Jesus interesting in two regards. First, it is interesting because the Old Testament records God being opposed to people indulging in spirituality-cloaked practices that were outside of the practices of the Mosaic Covenant, like consulting mediums to talk to the dead, or relying on soothsayers who claimed the ability to predict the future based upon magic, intuition, or other means including the stars. *Leviticus* condemns this in three places, as does *Deuteronomy* and *2 Kings*. (See e.g., Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:9-12; 2 Kings 23:24.) Saul had rid Israel of mediums, magicians, and such for this very reason, a fact that is key in the odd story from *1 Samuel* we heard this morning. The prophet Samuel had made it clear that the Israelites were to trust in Yahweh and Yahweh alone. They were to believe their future was in God's hands and be content with living into that unknown future regardless of what happened because it was God's. The Law made it clear that to put their trust in mediums and fortune tellers, etc. was to commit a kind of idolatry.

When things were going well for Saul, he followed Samuel's advice and rid the kingdom of all the soothsayers, necromancers, sorcerers, and more. But as we heard this morning, when things started going badly for Saul after Samuel died, and he felt that God wasn't answering his prayers, Saul was pretty quick to violate both God's and his own order by hunting down the one and only medium left nearby, a woman in Endor. He needed her to summon the prophet Samuel from the dead to give him advice about an upcoming battle with the Philistines. Incidentally, for those who like Bible trivia, apparently it was this so-called "witch" which inspired the folks who created the 1970s TV show *Bewitched* to name Darren's witchy mother-in-law Endora. But glamorizing the witch was definitely not the point of the biblical story. Just the opposite. The point is that for the transgression of consulting a necromancer, as well as for an earlier transgression in which Saul again put someone else's judgment before God's, the price Saul paid was death.

So, if seeking information about the future from someone or something other than Yahweh was so frowned upon that even the king of Israel was not spared when he broke the rule, you would think that it would be out of the question for people who believed that stars could predict the future to be among the first worshipers of the Christ child. But according to *Matthew*, that's exactly what happened. A bunch of astrologers, who were not even Jewish, were among the first to lay eyes upon God in the flesh. Moreover, with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they demonstrated greater insight in recognizing just who the Christ child was than Herod and his scribes. The magi recognized Jesus as God's chosen one, and for their wisdom in doing so, have been celebrated on Epiphany ever since.

Do you see the grace their presence in the story provides us? It's not just that they were Gentiles whose presence foreshadowed that Jesus would save both Jews and Gentiles with his life, death, and Resurrection, although that is a hugely important part of the story. It's also that the magi were spiritual seekers like us, who navigated through life by putting their faith in something less than God. But instead of being punished for it, they were mercifully led by God to the place where they could see the difference between the starshine they had worshiped and the light of God, and choose to follow God instead. The star led them to Jesus, but Jesus empowered them to go home another way.

At the very least, this means that for everyone who has ever been intrigued by the supposed healing properties of crystals, or dabbled with Ouija boards and palm reading, for everyone who has ever been entertained by the likes of the Long Island Medium or Tyler Henry, there is grace. But I would argue that it also means that for everyone who has ever navigated through life and/or planned the future according to something or someone less than God, like the promises of politicians or economists, the philosophies of new age gurus, or even the predictions of their parents about who or what they could be, there is also grace. The magi's presence in the Nativity means that God knows that we are spiritual seekers with trust and control issues, who have a terrible tendency to idolize everything but God, and desperately want to feel that we can predict the future. God knows this about us and decided in Christ to love and save us anyway. Jesus didn't come to condemn us for being either easily misled or stubborn in our idol worship. He doesn't hate us for building our lives more on the prognostications of the Farmer's Almanac and our financial planners than on our faith. He came for all of us, so that we all might learn how to look at the future a new way.

That is very good news. But it isn't the only take away from the fact that the magi were astrologers. Their story also teaches us to think carefully about who or what acts like a guiding star in our lives because their star didn't really get them to where they needed to go. It got them to Jerusalem, but that was nine miles off from where Jesus was. If they hadn't stopped in Herod's palace to get more specific directions, if the scribes hadn't told them about Bethlehem, then the magi might never have found Jesus. They were looking for a king, not a peasant baby. Similarly, many of the things and people we give control over our futures can get us so far but no further. They may make us money. They may make us more powerful, healthy, or popular. They may take our cares away temporarily. But they cannot fill the hole within us that sends us seeking in the first place, and they cannot control the future. Only God can do that.

The magi's experience reminds me of a story about a king named Ebrahim. He was very wealthy and powerful, and claimed to be a spiritual seeker. One night the king was awakened by the sounds of footsteps on the roof overhead. Alarmed, he shouted, "Who's there?" "A friend," a voice from the roof replied. "I've lost my camel." "You fool!" Ebrahim screamed, "Are you really looking for a camel on the roof?" "You fool," the voice replied, "Are you really looking for God in silk clothing, and lying on a golden bed?" According to the story, those words so filled the king with terror that he arose from his bed and changed his life to become a great saint.¹

¹ Still Proclaiming your Wonders: Homilies for the Eighties (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 55 (as cited in *Camel on the Roof*, Homiletics Online, Jan. 6, 1991; retrieved Dec. 23, 2015 from <http://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber>).

You can't find a camel by looking on the roof, and as the magi learned, you can't find God's future by staring at the stars. But that doesn't mean you have to be stuck feeling empty or searching forever. Consider the magi's story again. When they ended up in Jerusalem, the scribes shared with them the word of the Lord, which spoke of Bethlehem being the birthplace of the messiah. Then that idea changed the way they saw their star. Now it too seemed to be taking them to Bethlehem whereas only a few moments before it had seemed to be leading them to Jerusalem. Then, once they found the Christ child, they didn't need the star anymore to confirm their direction. *Matthew* says they went home by another way having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Jerusalem. Dreams are okay to listen to according to Scripture because God frequently uses them to communicate with human beings. So you see, the magi went from listening to the stars to listening to God. Once they had experienced God, the old way of doing things was far less compelling. They put their trust in God.

As we look ahead to a brand-new year, isn't it time that we do the same? Isn't it time that we choose a new way to navigate and a new way of thinking about the future? We tried so many alternatives last year. We tried finding our way into a future with hope by worshiping politicians, TV news people, money, power, and personal freedom. We tried finding our way by demonizing others, by hoarding and rioting, binge-watching T.V., and indulging in self-destructive habits. We have sought to guarantee a future with hope in every way we can imagine, and some of those ways have led us pretty close—hurray for the vaccine developed in record time! Not everything we idolized was bad. But if we want to get beyond Bethlehem without ending up right back in troubled Jerusalem with its madness and violence, or back in our old ruts from the past, then we need to try something different in this new year. The magi show us how. First, they put their trust in the Scriptures, and then, when those enabled them to experience God in Christ, in his way.

Instead of staring at the skies for ancient signs and wonders or moving forward with all the same kinds of inadequate and potentially toxic and idolatrous thinking that got us lost last year, let's begin this new year by committing to read the word of God with the same enthusiasm we read our horoscopes or same regularity we read the stock market report. In the stories of how God has lead humankind for millennia with wisdom and righteousness, and especially in the teaching of Christ, we are reminded that the way to God's future with hope is found by trusting in God and embracing God's values of grace and love. Those values must shape our decision-making and will enable us to draw close to God. They are values by which we can navigate, for as Carl Schurz once observed: "Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the sea fearing man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny."² When the magi left Bethlehem, they carried with them an experience of divine love which had to have changed and inspired them. May we leave Bethlehem and the Christmas season equally changed and inspired, confident that in Christ we have all the direction we need, and the assurance that our future is safe in his hands. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Goodreads Carl Schurz quotes, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/467897-ideals-are-like-stars-you-will-not-succeed-in-touching>