

By Another Road

Matthew 2: 1-12

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Matthew is the Gospel with a star.

When we tell the Nativity story in sermon or pageant or Christmas carol, we tend to throw Luke's account and Matthew's account into a big pot, stir them together, and out come:

- Mary and Elizabeth,
- Zechariah,
- Joseph,
- genealogies,
- angels,
- Bethlehem,
- shepherds,
- wise men,
- and a baby in a manger -- all in one seamless story.

In fact, there is little in common between the two Nativity narratives. Matthew and Luke write from distinct perspectives and each emphasizes carefully selected aspects of the story.

Luke focuses on Mary and Elizabeth, on God's power to bring new life in surprising ways and unexpected places. Through Mary's hymn of praise, Zechariah's prophecy, and Simeon's song, Luke establishes his conviction that the newly-come Messiah is the One who brings God's justice into the world, the One who raises and blesses those who have been oppressed and exploited, the One who sees and loves and saves those who have been overlooked by the world.

I don't think Matthew would argue with anything Luke writes, but he has different points to make about this Child. Matthew begins with a 40-generation genealogy, which we often skip thinking it's just a boring list of names. But it is in fact a fascinating list of names by which Matthew firmly places Jesus within the people of Israel; identifies him as Son of Abraham, Son of David, indisputably connected to the lineage from which the Messiah is to come. That is Matthew's first point – this baby, Jesus, is the fulfillment of Jewish hope and prophecy.

Because that is the point he wants to make, Matthew focuses on Joseph rather than Mary, for it is Joseph who connects Jesus to the lineage that points all the way back to Abraham, back to the initial covenant by which God's people are blessed.

And Matthew is the Gospel with a star.

Exotic travelers from a far, foreign country follow a star to Bethlehem. These men who see and heed a bright heavenly guide are utterly different from all the other characters in our Christmas story.

Unlike humble Mary and Joseph, the magi are rich and cosmopolitan, sophisticated city-dwellers rather than village peasants. Unlike the lowly shepherds, their lives and work are marked by power and prestige. Unlike terrified Herod and his subjects, these strangers are intrigued and attracted by the birth of a foretold king.

Perhaps most significantly, these wise men, these magi, are Gentiles, coming into a story by and for and about the Jews.

And with their coming, a story by and for and about the Jews escapes any national boundaries and becomes a story for and about the world. This newborn King of the Jews is in fact the eternal king of all humanity and all creation. His birth will impact not only the people of Israel, but all people everywhere, beginning with these exotic travelers who follow a star.

This celestial body – star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright -- allows Matthew to make his second point – that this Child who fulfills Jewish hope and prophecy has come not only for the Jews but for all people, for through the covenant with Abraham, God's people are blessed not as an end in itself, but to be a blessing for the world.

There has been endless speculation and calculation through the centuries about the Christmas star. It is so central to our shared understanding of the Nativity – this star that points to the place where Baby Jesus lies. Luke has angels announce the birth. Matthew gives that task to a star that causes “wise men from the East” to leave their homes and travel long, difficult miles to pay homage to an infant. What sort of heavenly light could inspire such a response? Was it a comet? A conjunction of planets? Can we identify it with a particular astronomical event and figure out exactly when Jesus was born?

I like the suggestion of New Testament professor William R. Herzog who writes that “The star of Bethlehem was not necessarily an extraordinary celestial event, but an ordinary star seen through the extraordinary eyes of the magi. They had ‘eyes to see’, but Herod and his scribes did not.” (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 1., p. 215)

Having been wise and attentive enough to notice the star, the magi are also wise and attentive enough to realize that Herod does not share their joy at this birth.

And so, they “leave for their own country by another road”. They do not endanger themselves and the Holy Infant by returning to Herod's palace to tell the jealous king where this promised Messiah who so threatens Herod's comfort and power can be found.

The star which led them to the Child has played its part in their story. They are directed homeward not by a star but by a dream in which the world is no longer controlled by the old structures of coercion and corruption which Herod embodies. Instead the Child whom they have honored and gifted opens the possibility of a new sort of world, a new way of living, a new road of peace and justice. The wise men travel on that new road, for they have been changed by their encounter with the Christ Child. The road that brought them to Jerusalem, to Herod's palace, belongs to the past and will not take them where they are headed now, into a future made new and bright by the Light of the new-born King whose coming was heralded by the light of a star.

Matthew is the Gospel with a star.

In Matthew's telling, the star guides wise men who travel to pay homage to the special Child. In our reading and in our re-telling, the star guides us as well. It guides us to and through our joyous Christmas celebrations of this holy birth. And it guides us into the new life to which this birth calls us.

Twelfth-century English monk, Aelred, writes:

Epiphany's new star reiterates the heavenly message: Arise and be enlightened! A sign of the Lord's birth has appeared in the sky to invite us to detach ourselves from the love of earthly things and raise ourselves heavenward; and this sign consists of a star so we may understand that through Christ's birth we shall be flooded with new light.

There are many ways we can open our lives to that new light. Epiphany's star can take many forms when we are attentive to God's presence and movement in the world.

Here's one option which I hope you will find meaningful.

Again, this year, we are invited to make a "Star Word" part of our devotional life. The star cut-outs which are being distributed each have a printed word. Each star has a different word and we are leaving it up to the Holy Spirit to determine which word you are given. Please take this Star Word home with you and allow it space in your heart and mind. Sit with your word. Ponder how God might be speaking to you through the concept or image this word represents. Consider where God might be calling you to put some time or creativity.

You may be holding a word which you've always cherished, and be feeling grateful to have received an easy, comfortable gift. I encourage you to move away from comfort and to carry your response to this word beyond what you have contemplated in the past. Allow yourself to see and hear and feel new depths and nuances. Open yourself to the holy discomfort which can bring spiritual growth.

You may be holding a word which you find challenging and uncomfortable, and wondering how you will find blessing in its company. Invite the Holy Spirit to point you toward a new understanding. Trust that God will indeed bless you as you pray and contemplate, though quite possibly not in any way that you expect.

Perhaps you will want to engage in some study around your word. I would be happy to help you find resources for such study.

Put your star word in a place that is part of your daily life so this word can become part of your daily life.

And, as in previous years, please consider writing a reflection on new insights or relationships or intentions to which your star word leads you. There will be information in the bulletin and newsletter about sharing those reflections among the congregation.

The wise men, having been changed by their encounter with the Christ Child, traveled home by another road.

We are changed by encountering our Savior at the manger, at his table, in our prayers. Having been so changed, we travel another road as his disciples. As the wise men were led by a bright star in the night sky, so we are led by the Light of our Lord.

What does the Light look like in your life? What star is God sending to light your path in this new year? May the Star Word which you are holding guide and bless you as you travel the road of faith. May our lives this day and always pay homage to the One before whom we kneel with the wise men who followed a star.

Amen.