

Arise Shine – The world is about to turn

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Psalm 72

Isaiah 60: 1-7

Matthew 2:1-12

The Christmas season ends today. As we celebrate the three wise ones coming to see the child Jesus, the 12 days of Christmas are over. All through advent we sang, we proclaimed, we shouted, we banged on the benches: "the world is about to turn." So now Christmas has come and gone. Is the world turning?

Of the two birth narratives we often highlight Luke's story of the angels, shepherds, the manger and the stable. For Epiphany we focus on the story from Matthew, the star that guides the wise ones from the east to Bethlehem where they find Jesus and Mary.

Just to review: The three magi have evolved into being called kings because of the associated scriptures, Psalm 72 and Isaiah 60 that we heard this morning. Matthew doesn't actually call them kings and he doesn't say how many there were, but since there were three gifts our natural assumption is that there were three of them. (I am not sure if that is a safe assumption or not. If they were anything like the grandparents in our family it would only take one traveler from afar to lavish three or more gifts on a beloved child.)

Matthew features the exotic non-Jewish star followers. Readers of this gospel are to understand up front that this Jesus is not only for the Jews but for everyone. If royal astrologers from Persia bow down recognizing this boy king then he is definitely for people all over the world.

Each year I have the privilege of contemplating this text and this year what intrigues me is the star. I have lived in the city too long. Last summer when we were on vacation I discovered, to my astonishment, there are stars in the sky. I have never seen stars like I did that night in the Colorado Rockies. I finally understand why people are drawn to telescopes and astronomy. As glorious as those stars were, the star that is described by Matthew seems even more remarkable. Matthew's star is almost magical in its intention, in its ability to lead the magi to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem.

The magi follow the star across deserts and plains for hundreds of miles and then the star stops over Jerusalem. If you were a star watcher you knew that a star this bright meant royalty. The magi go to Herod, the current ruler, for information. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We

observed his star when it rose; we have followed it for miles and we have come to pay our respects."

Though hearing about this new king of the Jews is a threat to Herod, he kindly gives his own orders, "Go and search diligently for this child. Stop by on your way home and give me a full report. I would love to go worship this new king myself." And then they are off again, following this star on the move. As they approach Bethlehem the star hovers over the particular house where Mary and Jesus are.

When they see that the star has finally stopped they are overjoyed. Their quest is finally ended. They enter the house falling to their knees to worship this child king. (One side note I can't help mentioning: Joseph is not in this story – to provide security, check identification cards or pour tea. Even though in Matthew most of the action surrounding Jesus' birth involves Joseph, in this scene it is passive Mary that is with Jesus and the magi.)

The star seems to have a mind of its own. It's as if this star is a guide for the magi alone. Doesn't anyone else see it? Why don't wise ones from the west come, or the religious leaders, or anyone else? Is it a star just for them, meant for their eyes only?

We know that Matthew's message here was that this Jesus child was born for everyone. The Jewish leaders missed the star. So Matthew emphasizes that though Herod asks the religious leaders about this newborn king and they have the answer about Bethlehem, they do not participate in searching for him. It is those who are not Jewish that seek and find.

Okay, the puzzle of Matthew is solved. But what about our own puzzle? What might this star be for us? What might we see guiding us? Are there signs from God that seem very clear to us that no one else seems to notice? How do we verify that the star really is from God and we aren't just hallucinating?

Over the years this congregation has followed the leading of numerous stars toward new ministries that have lasted well past their founders. Forty years ago the International Guest House was started to provide hospitality and lodging to international visitors to Washington, D.C. Kamleker Dandeker, who first saw that star, moved on years ago following another star. I wonder if Kam felt as if he was wandering in the desert until the star came into focus above 1441 Kennedy Street NW. Most of us were not here more than 40 years ago when that bright star was seen, but as is the case with stars the light continues to shine brightly.

We might ask – When you see a guiding star how do you talk about it with others? If you are inexplicably taken with a star leading you, how do you explain it? And how do you make the decision to follow the star?

Matthew tells us that these astronomers came to Jerusalem together. Whether they knew each other or just happened to meet up as they followed the star is not made explicit. But each of them saw the star and made the decision to follow its light.

As Anabaptists we are taught the importance of testing out ideas with the community. We are often suspicious of those who follow stars on their own. We don't know how the magi ventured out on their own but eventually they met up with each other, and discovered they all were following this star that lead them to Jerusalem.

In the December HYMN I wrote about a star I have been gazing at. I met with three other pastors in Minnesota in November. We prayed and talked about how we might help other pastors in the Mennonite Church find the courage to speak their support of hospitality to all God's children, no matter their sexual orientation. Given our own adventure so far on this road, and our own encounters with the religious authorities it may seem futile and foolish to follow this star. Why would I choose to go down this path again? It could lead to further sanctions, more anger and deeper heartache. It may lead to alienation from family and friends. But the alternative, staying at home, not following this star, does not protect me from further sanctions, anger and heartache.

The next part of the story in Matthew is not as heartwarming. The magi do not report back to Herod. Joseph has a dream with instructions to flee to Egypt so as to escape the wrath of Herod. Herod feels threatened by this baby king and in his fear he has all the baby boys less than two years old killed.

We dare not be metaphorical here. The killing of children is all too real. We need only look to Eldoret, Kenya, this past week where hundreds of women and children sought refuge in a church and were killed when the building was set on fire. As in Herod's day, when the status quo is threatened those in power use drastic means to hold on to their power.

I hesitate to attempt an analogous situation in the Mennonite church. Certainly gays and lesbians have experienced spiritual violence for generations, often perpetuated precisely by those who preach peace and salvation. And we know that lesbian and gay people are not always safe physically, as Isaiah says "thick darkness covers the peoples." Hate crimes are real even though what is at stake is love.

This star I have been observing seems to be leading me to say that I am willing to stand up and take the heat. Over the years, lesbian and gay Christians have shared their stories, had their sex lives examined and ogled. They have opened themselves to the church and most of the time the response has been, "it is not enough, you are not enough, you must change." It is time for those of us who are married, with children, those who are straight and in positions of power

to speak, to stand shoulder to shoulder and announce that we want to pastor the whole body, the whole people of God.

But as your pastor I do not want to speak out of turn. Though I am following this star with three pastor colleagues, my primary journey is with you here at Hyattsville. Because that is the case, I seek your counsel and feedback, your reactions and responses. I expect you will not all have the same responses, that we don't all see the star from the same angle or even see the star at all. But I want to hear from you nonetheless.

There is another star that we all have been observing for almost 20 years and that is the star of the future of this congregation. Where will we be in 50 years? Will this building be adequate for our ministry? What will our mission be and who will carry it out? This star is beginning to shine ever more brightly as the building committee works and listens to the congregation. The analysis of the recent survey indicates that while we are not united on what the next steps are, there is a strong sense in the congregation (at least from those who participated in the survey) that now is the time to take some steps. We don't know what those next steps will be but we may finally be ready to take them.

It is a starry, starry night around here. Is it possible to follow two guiding stars at the same time? Are both stars from God? Does one shine more brightly than the other? Does it matter which star we choose? Do we even have a choice?

Wendy read two texts this morning. In Matthew it is the magi that follow the star, they see that star and they follow it until they find what they are looking for. The Isaiah passage we often understand as a foretelling of the kings coming to Jesus and we identify Jesus as the light.

But read in context, Isaiah is writing to his exiled community not to provide some far-fetched futuristic scene, but as a promise and a hope. Isaiah identifies the community of Israel as *the star*. The brightness comes upon them; the nations and kings come flocking to Israel, to see her brightness. "One day the light of God will shine on you and you will know that you are God's chosen. Arise, shine, that day is here."

If God's light is with the people of Israel then perhaps God's light is with us too. Though darkness still covers the earth, and dense clouds enshroud the nations, upon you YHWH now dawns, and God's glory will be seen among you.

That is a big promise, that God's glory can be seen right here among God's people. God's light is reflected in us. Some Christians might be quick to claim this promise, reading this part of the passage especially: "The riches of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you."

This passage humbles me and frankly is a bit frightening. It is a lot of responsibility: to be the receptacle of God's light, to receive those who come toward the light, to welcome them to join the worship of God. In Isaiah it is clear that the vision is for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It will be rebuilt not by the people themselves but by the foreigners who have come to the city. It will be a joyous, bustling place where there is no more violence, only praise and YHWH is the light, day and night. In Revelation, John describes a city like this. This is a promise for all generations.

Isaiah's vision of the future is given to a people who have been beaten down, who have experienced exile, who have wondered if God was really with them. And the clear answer is yes, YHWH is with them and they can live in that light.

Arise, shine, for your light has come. The glory of YHWH is rising upon you and the world is about to turn.