

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JANUARY 6, 2019

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

Litany

Based on Isaiah 60:1-4

Arise! Shine! Your light has come!

Arise! Shine! Your light has come!

Your light has come;

the Lord's glory has shone upon you.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come!

Though darkness covers the earth

and gloom the nations,

the Lord will shine upon you;

God's glory will appear over you.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come!

Nations will come to your light,

and kings to your dawning radiance.

Lift up your eyes and look around.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come!

The Scripture

Matthew 2:1-12

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.

The Message
Beneath the Stars
Nick Larson

Just yesterday morning, I stood in the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, the beautiful Catholic cathedral completed in 1914. Each day this past week on our Disciples on Campus college mission trip, we drove through the Central West End from Union Ave. Christian Church, where we were staying, to Compton Heights Christian Church, where we were serving. And each day we watched as the sun glinted off the huge green tiled dome. So, as we entered the doors, and I gazed upward into the 143-foot dome and at the 83,000-square-feet of mosaics, I pondered what it might have been like for those Magi in our text this morning to gaze upward toward that star in the sky.

What would it have felt like? To be a Magi, a priest from Persia, most likely a Zoroastrian, who was one day were practicing your own religion, and an auspicious star appeared in the night sky. You would have gathered with friends and colleagues to pondered together what this strange occurrence was and what it meant, right?

This in its own way, it was not strange or unorthodox because from what we know of this ancient Persian religion, they were practitioner of magic and astrology. In fact, our own word “magic” comes from the same root as Magi. These so often referred to as ‘three kings’ were religious scholars, revered as astronomers and astrologists. They studied the stars and planets, interpreting the meaning behind cosmic events.

So, to them, anything unusual in the sky would have been considered an omen, so the star they saw must have really been both rare and visibly spectacular. These Magi reported omens to kings, perhaps a moon moving in front of a planet, or a lunar eclipse. Their job was to interpret the meaning of these phenomena. They were known for creating nativity charts, where they recorded the position of the planets, the Sun, and the Moon and other astronomical data at the time of a child’s birth, in order to make predictions about that person’s life.

So too, modern astronomers have presupposed that perhaps this star was not a star after all, but something one called a triple conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn – with two planets coming close together in the sky. So perhaps it was an alignment between the sun, Earth, Jupiter, and Saturn, which astronomers say happen only about every 900-years forming a great light in the nights sky. Yet, others presuppose that it could have been a comet, and it has been observed and recorded at times when comets “stand over” the Earth, because of their coma and tail sometimes looking like an arrow. Whatever the case, Matthew describes the event as something spectacular

in the Magi's eastern sky. It was spectacular enough that these experienced star gazers would have been motivated to leave their homes and travel towards Jerusalem.

So spectacular in fact that they set out, not by car or plane, or train, but perhaps by camel or horseback and by foot. They would have had to traverse the terrain from their home in Persia to Jerusalem and then onto Bethlehem. So, these traveling magi, the astronomers from a far-away land, traveled at least 6,000, probably more like 9,000, miles to reach Bethlehem. This was not a walk around the block.

Imagine, night after night, camping along the road, stopping in villages and taverns. Journeying from inn to inn. The Promised Land, given to Moses, was a land of mountains and valleys that drink rain from heaven. A land full of dramatic changes in elevations, which were only some of the countless perils for travelers.

Nevertheless, travel was a major part of the first-century life, in fact we know that Mary traveled quite a bit even while pregnant to visit Elizabeth in the hills of Judea, to Bethlehem itself, and even fleeing into Egypt after being warned by an angel.

By the least expensive mode of transportation, walking, we generally think one could walk about 20 -miles in a day. Itineraries and travelogues of ancient Egyptians suggest that such a rate was typical. People walking the Persian Royal Road from Persepolis to Sardis (1,560-miles) averaged 18-miles a day, completing the entire journey in three months. Even the fastest governmental couriers changing horses at posting stations could only cover those 1,560-miles in nine days.

Horses were of course faster, but also more expensive. A horse can travel 25 to 30-miles per day. Leaving the journey to be completed in a blistering 200+ days.

Along their way, travelers risked dangers and hardship. Attacks by wild beasts remained a threat until the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in the Jordan valley. Worse than the lions, which were eradicated from Palestine during the 1800s, were the unpredictable Syrian bears in the hills.

Far more likely were attacks by bandits along lonely stretches, as described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. These attacks were often politically motivated, and strangers from Persia would have been a prime target. Pilgrims from the entire civilized world – from Rome to Mesopotamia, from Pontus to Arabia – came through the crossroads of the world, Jerusalem.

So, what often is reduced to just a few lines in a famous Christmas carol, was in fact, at least a year's journey for this band of magi, these foreign priests, venturing into the world after an astronomical event.

The gospel of Matthew tells us that the Magi visited the infant Jesus to do him homage. Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, they visited King Herod to determine the location of this king being born, to which Herod, the half-Jewish ruler, told him about the prophet Isaiah's claim that this king would be born of the house of David in the city of bread, Bethlehem.

So now almost a year-ish later after one astronomical event that began this long trek, there must have been a second one, pointing them to the house where they found the almost toddling Jesus, in fact, Matthew doesn't say that this house was even in Bethlehem. There these star-gazing wise ones, present Jesus with their three gifts.

For me, as I stood in that Basilica, I wondered what gifts I had to offer. What gifts have we as God's people, as wisdom seekers alike, have to bring to Jesus.

I thought of the work that was done by our college students this week at Isaiah 58 ministries, where hundreds of families were served food, offered community, place to be known and to know others. I thought of the stripes that we painted upon the walls helping the thousands of guests yet to traverse those halls to navigate their way, or to take their own journey to reach a place where in fact they were offered the gift of food, nourishment, minor health care, computer labs, an incredibly cheap thrift store. All by those who claimed to be serving the least of these, to be as Isaiah 58 itself puts it, repairers of the breach.

There were 11 of us who served, painted, and distributed gifts. And as I handed out bread, and ham (giant almost 4-foot-long sleeves of ham) I thought, "Yes, I, too, was offering gifts to Jesus." Gifts of sustenance, gifts of nourishment, gifts of friendly smiles and can-do-attitudes.

This month, our own Rev. Martha Jolly, Terry, and I will be exploring little known or unlikely people within wider justice movements to explore who God might be using to inspire us to journey with beneath the stars to notice what God is already up to in the world.

What is the story behind the star that we might know in a justice movement, to recognize the lesser known gifts, offered by those with often forgotten names that work tirelessly to make God's love known?

Theirs was a journey long ago that was simple enough, three gifts, brought from far-away to an infant child and his family, that caused a disruption that is still rippling in our lives on this Epiphany Sunday.

El Castillo is a project by Mexican artist Jorge Mendez Blake that subtly examines the impact of a single outside force. For the installation, he constructed a 75x13-foot brick

wall that balances on top a single copy of Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. The mortar-less wall bulges at the site of the inserted text, creating an arch that extends to the top of the precarious structure.

Although a larger metaphor could be applied to the installation no matter what piece of literature was chosen, Mendez Blake specifically selected *The Castle* to pay tribute to Kafka's lifestyle and work. Who was a deeply introverted figure who wrote privately and was only published after his death by his friend Max. The minimal, yet poignant presence is reflected in the brick work – showcasing how a small idea or gesture can have monumental presence.

Consider the three gifts carried by these Magi. They represent a gesture that had monumental presence. Yet, this story isn't just about something that happened many years ago. It's about something that continues to happen in our daily lives.

Do we have the wisdom to notice the unusual in and among the ordinary of our own everyday lives?

Better yet, do we have the desire or the persistence to follow it for 200-300 days to see if it might lead us to the one, we've been looking for all along?

I want you to listen to a poem written by the Rev. Jan Richardson called "**For Those Who Have Far to Travel.**"

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,

as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;
to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel
to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.

As we travel through these days of Epiphany, may that feeling, that striking appearance of God in the midst of our crazy and messed up world, draw your eye. Suddenly things are different, it is as if the world rotated and yet you remained. There is suddenly something new, deeper, a different perspective than there was before. It may have happened to you before or it may not, these rare occurrences often lead to new life discovery's or shifts in paradigms never to return to what they once were for you.

Look for them as they come from depth of prior knowledge which allows in a moment of inspiration significant thought about a problem, a leap in understanding. It is as if you stand for a moment on one side of a chasm, and then in an instant you are standing on the other looking back as where you once stood.

So, Broadway, know that it doesn't always take an apple on the head, or a light bulb overhead, being knocked off your horse and blinded for days, but sometimes it's as simple as a breath. It is God slicing through our awareness revealing that this world has more to it than we often see.

Take a moment, today, this week, to write, draw, or scribble about where in your life God is calling you to offer your gift, to bring about justice in this world. The good news of Epiphany is that you don't have to be the star, you only have to follow it.

For if we could see the whole journey at once, maybe we would never undertake it. Yet the disruption God has in store for you, will change everything directly around it. So, may you see that all the risk and dangers that lie on the road can be overcome so that

you might kneel before Jesus and offer what you have brought with you. May you know the joy that comes from giving that gift that helps to bring justice to the family of an infant baby about to turn and hide from the coming tyrant, so that you might be a repairer of the breach.

Thanks be to God. Amen.