

“What Shall We Do with This Light?”

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Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

At 9:10 pm on the Thursday after this past Christmas Day, a strange and surprising thing happened over New York City. A bright blue light shown across the city, accompanied by an explosive boom. We had spent the day with friends in Brooklyn, and having crossed home into New Jersey just 20 minutes earlier, we were just shy of witnessing it ourselves, which is probably a good thing. I know about a lot of things, but electric light surges is not one of them. So, I would have been among the witnesses who thought something apocalyptic was happening; maybe an act of terrorism, nuclear devastation, or environmental destruction. Others thought it was certainly an alien invasion. But as it turns out, this light came from an electrical fire at the ConEdison power plant in Astoria, Queens. Though it caused a brief power outage in the neighborhood and at LaGuardia Airport, no one was hurt and no damage was caused in the neighborhood. But the experience is now embedded in the mythology of New Yorkers, who nicknamed it the *Astoria Borealis*.

Long, long before people could Google their way out of a perplexing, unexplainable event, they read the signs of the land, the waters, and the sky and saw holy purpose breaking through. “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” This prophecy, from the book of Isaiah, echoes in the Matthew story of the wise men who followed a star from its rising until it stopped over Bethlehem. I know a woman, Niveem Sarras, who was born in Bethlehem, a Palestinian who is a Lutheran pastor who was studying for her PhD while I lived in Chicago. Coming from the Christian tradition in Bethlehem, Dr. Sarras knows this

story pretty well! She points out that in the original Greek text, the men who followed the star to Bethlehem weren't called wise men. They were magi, or in Greek, *magoi*. Magi are priests from the Zoroastrian religion, which originated in Iran and though small, still exists today. Magi were known for being astrologers who could read the stars and find predictions in them. The religion is named for Zoroaster, a prophet. Followers believe he was miraculously conceived by a 15-year old Persian virgin, then began his ministry at age 30. Sounds familiar, right? Although Zoroastrianism began 1,000 years before Jesus birth, their prophet directed followers that "other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded. Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior."¹ Their entry into Matthew's version of the gospel story shows that they recognized Jesus as Messiah; as scripture records, when they found the young child, they fell down, and worshipped him.

These magi, who came from the East, were border crossers. They migrated where the light led them. Given the opportunity to earn favor with Herod, who was King over Judea representing Roman power, they declined his request to reveal where the Christ child was born. Instead of returning to Herod's palace, they crossed the borders back into their own country by another path, for they had been told in a dream not to return to Herod. So they just slipped back into the night and disappeared. I wish I was as good at forging a pathway of liberation, without constantly checking over my shoulder wondering or guessing what the authorities might do.

It turns out that Herod's narcissism knew no limit to cruelty. In his desperate attempts to preserve his own authority, he ordered the killing of all the children of Bethlehem who had been born in the past 2 years. Jesus was in real danger, but an angel appeared to Mary and Joseph, instructing them to flee with the child into the land of Egypt.

¹ Niveen Sarras, "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12" in *Working Preacher*, January 6, 2019

You can hear in this bit echoes of the story in Exodus. The wise men tricking Herod were like the midwives who hid the newborn Hebrew babies from Pharaoh, who wanted to kill them in fear that his rule would be threatened. Mary and Joseph escaped Herod by fleeing into Egypt-- a reversal of the Hebrews' path to freedom from Egypt into the promised land.

I wonder how these stories of liberation and salvation would have happened if there had been a border wall blocking passage between these countries. In fact, these days there *is* a 25-foot concrete wall separating the small town of Bethlehem in the West Bank from Jerusalem, which is just 9 miles away. Interestingly, when the magi first arrived looking for Jesus, they ended up in Jerusalem. After all, if you are searching for the king of the Jews, why not arrive in the city where the Temple is located, and the palace that housed the great kings in the line of David?

Herod became aware of their search so he called all the chief priests and scribes to help him do a bit of bible study. They drew from the ancient and holy texts and came up with a prophecy from Micah, "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." Thanks to his resident biblical scholars, Herod now held the key to the place where the Messiah would be born: not in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish power and history, but in the humble town of Bethlehem.

As for the magi, they again followed the star, wandering until it stopped right over the place where the child was. Notice how the magi's wanderings brought them into the general area where Christ would come. But they needed the bit of extra information that came from scripture to direct their star-gazing wanderings to some place more specific. I know there are many people who also wander, with very good intentions and spiritual yearnings. I love the open-mindedness of people who are seekers

but are not ruled by the dogma in religion that sometimes becomes more important than the journey's purpose. But there is something about engaging with a community that does study and seek to discern scripture that can add direction and purpose to your journey.

On the other hand, Herod had all the best biblical scholars ready to serve him. He knew the importance of looking to scripture and accepted its authority. However, as Tom Long points out, "One can, like Herod, be in favor of studying scripture, but still be on the wrong side of God's will."

On Wednesday, this country's newest Senators and Representatives were sworn into office. I was moved by a picture I saw of the holy books they used for their swearing in. There were Protestant bibles, Catholic bibles, Jewish Tanakhs... a Muslim representative used a Quran that had belonged to Thomas Jefferson. One representative who is not religious used a book of US Law. But the epiphany story reminds me that it does not matter what book a politician swears upon if they are not open to how God's light might lead them.

I know because you are here that you are already willing to engage, at least on some level, with a community that works to study and discern God's word as revealed through scripture. But how can we also open our eyes to the many guiding stars God places on our journey?

There is a story from the teachings of the early desert fathers and mothers, Christians who secluded themselves in search of mystical union with God. This one comes from Egypt, at the end of the 4th century. "Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not become fire?"

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and philosopher, wrote, “Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves and gravity, we shall harness for God energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world we will have discovered fire.”

I want to spend the last minutes of this sermon letting you take the time to engage that fire, that light. If you are willing, close your eyes for a bit and get comfortable in your pew. Take a few deep breaths as you settle your body, mind and heart.

Now, picture the darkness of creation: its mystery, and unfolded possibilities. You do not have to be afraid of the darkness, for remember, you were formed from within the darkness of someone else’s womb, where you were kept safe and nourished until you were ready to emerge into the world.

In the darkness, a voice shouts out, “Let there be light!!” And there was light. What does that light look like?

As you look around, you see the light is giving energy and food to all that is around you. See the light glisten and dance on the water’s surface. Look at how the leaves on a new shoot unfold as they rise towards the light, and the trees reveal their blossoms to the light’s encouraging warmth. You see an animal stretched out, basking in the light, perfectly relaxed, perfectly at peace. How will you receive this light? Will you be in a meadow? On the beach at the water’s edge? Somewhere else?

You feel the light shining down on your head, warming your scalp. Feel your skin get warmed by it, see the color of your skin vibrant in the light. You feel the light enter you, healing you and connecting you to an energy that is millions of years old and even older than that.

You notice that in this light, you are losing your fear. You are no longer anxious. You suspect this light, though ancient, might bring you to new horizons, new ideas, new wonders to behold. How will you respond?

You start to notice there are other people around you, and you are aware that they also possess this light. You realize you are connected to a power that is much bigger, so much bigger, than you alone. Imagine what can be done if this light is shared!

Soon it will be time to leave this light. Take a moment again to let it fill you, and ask from it what you need.

You know that darkness will come again, but you are not afraid because you know that it serves a purpose too. It provides the rest needed for a new beginning. It is the time when lovers reach for one another. It grants us mystery, so that we can accept that we cannot know all things, be all things, do all things. Not everything is up to us. And you know that God promises a dawn, a rising, will come again. The pathway to the light is given to us in scriptures but maybe it is also in the skies and even on the faces of one another, if we are willing to see God's light in them.

Now you have received some of this holy light inside of you and you are ready to leave the shadows of your eyelids to see the light of today. As you are ready, open your eyes, knowing there is an even brighter light that is within and is beyond you. Thanks be to God. Amen.