

“Star Words”

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Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

As part of the Children’s Sermon, you were each given a star. Your star might have said something like LOVE, KINDNESS, ENDURANCE, HOPE, STRONG, STEADFAST, LISTEN

(ask what other words were given...). These star words are a gift to you, and a lens to help you see this new year in light of that value or description. The word may be something you already possess, or it may be something outside of you worth seeking. I’d look forward to hearing stories of how that word resonates with your life now, or whether it even leads you on an odyssey towards something spiritual and new.

Many churches now engage in the practice of sharing Star Words on Epiphany-- it is certainly not a practice I came up with originally. And, of course, we do this in honor of the 3 magi who followed the star long, long ago.

Thinking of these three kings, or magi, however, I wish I had put a star out there, into the congregation, that said, OOPS! Because, if you notice in Matthew’s gospel, the star they had observed led them to Jerusalem-- home of Herod-- not Bethlehem, birthplace of Jesus.

It is written in Isaiah that...

*Nations shall come to your light,
Kings to your brightness of dawn.
The abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
The wealth of the nations shall come to you.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
And shall proclaim the name of the Lord.*

If we were to think of a place these words might describe today, a place where the nations gather, a place of great brightness, a place that holds the wealth of the nations... well, wouldn’t that be New York City, the eternal glow of Times Square,

leaders of the world gathered at the United Nations, and with all the wealth of Wall Street?

Imagine if these Magi landed somewhere in Midtown looking for a king, but instead were told they were 9 miles off, to head instead to Leonia? That is exactly what happened to these astrologers from long ago.

Isaiah 60 was written around the time when the Israelites, who had been held captive as exiles, removed from Jerusalem for about 70 years, were finally allowed to return to their land by King Cyrus of Persia, who defeated their Babylonian captors. So, this vision upon their return to their beloved city, the place they believed was promised to them by God, was certainly bright. Jerusalem was the place where they remembered kingship through the line of David. Jerusalem was where their Temple had been based. Jerusalem was the heart of the land they believed had been given to their ancestors by God. Some commentaries even suggest that these magi coming from the East may have come from Babylon-- where today, Iran and Iraq border one another-- and had inherited stories and prophecies from the Jews who had spent time there generations back, so they knew what to look for in the night sky.

No wonder the magi went to Jerusalem. When they got there, they found a palace. They found the Temple. They found a powerful ruler-- Herod. But they did not find the one whom they were seeking, the one the skies and the prophecies had promised to them. It was the biblical scholars who consulted the scriptures and came up with a different idea: it's not JERUSALEM... it's BETHLEHEM!

Walter Brueggemann, a contemporary biblical scholar, suggests that these ancient biblical scholars had pointed the magi to a different text-- Micah 5:2-4, which says, "But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old..."

9 miles off. I have been to Jerusalem, and I have been to Bethlehem, 9 miles away. Today it is even harder to get from one place to another, because there is a wall of separation blocking off one from another. Who can get through will depend on their passport, their citizenry, and their religion. For some, even with the right documents, passing through by car or bus would take just as long as walking because the restrictions are so tight.

It was kind of a big mistake, if you think about it. The magi ended up in the cradle of Herod's power rather than at the cradle of the Messiah. There are many other ways the story could have gone. They could have decided that Herod was the one to worship, and stayed in Jerusalem. Perhaps Herod could even have had them detained, as foreigners suggesting a rule that would undermine his. The magi could have decided that the sky had deceived them, and just headed back east to their home. They could have decided there was no way a king could be born in a backwoods town, especially not in a stable meant for housing animals.

But instead, these magi accept the vulnerability of the story. They accept the simplicity of a peasant family nurturing God made flesh. They believe in the possibility that God could use humble means to accomplish extravagant presence. They journey those 9 miles more, and then fall on their knees to cherish the holy.

Many of us use the time of New Year's to evaluate and reflect upon our lives. Have we accomplished the goals we set out for? Are we happy with the arc our life is taking? But the truth is, our destinations are not always as direct as we intend them to be. We might find big obstacles in the way. We might find ourselves branching off in a totally different direction from where we started. We might find ourselves tracing steps we made earlier, but this time we are wiser and know better how to interpret important signs along the way. Sometimes, like the magi, the star we follow leads us to a big OOPS. Some of us throw up our hands and say that despite our journeys, despite our seeking, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

For the magi, the direction for the rest of their journey had to come from a deeper examination of scripture. I believe that can help all of us, too-- even those of us whose earlier readings of scripture may have gotten us lost to begin with. That is why each of these star words have scriptures written on them-- to point you deeper into the scriptures. But something else that made the magi so wise was that they did not let failure stop them. They had hope that was even bigger than their own success or failure. It was not just about what they could accomplish, but what God was accomplishing in the world, and how they could help welcome it forward.

Finally, the magi continued to follow the light. They kept their practice of studying the sky, and it revealed to them that Jerusalem was not the final place where the star would hover. I want to share a story from the early Christian monasticism of the desert fathers and mothers, who had a mystical experience of the divine.

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?

In today's modern age, we have mastered the winds, the waves and gravity. We have harnessed weapons of mass destruction and are even on the brink of a war that will result in far too many civilian lives lost. But what would happen if focussed instead on harnessing God's energies of love? Then for the second time in the history of the world we will have discovered fire-- not the kind of fire that kills and destroys, as we are seeing so tragically in Australia these days-- but the kind of fire that draws forth the light God has already sent us.