

“Star Tracks”

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Isaiah 43:16-21

Matthew 2:1-12

On the last day of 2024, in a small town just south of Nairobi, Kenya, a local resident was looking after his cow when suddenly, he heard a loud bang. As Joseph Mutua told it, “I looked around; I could not see any smoke in the clouds. I went by the roadside to check if there was any car accident, but there wasn’t any collision.”

Then, according to an interview with the New York Times, Mr. Mutua and his neighbors “looked up and saw a large circular object slowly falling from the sky. It resembled a giant car steering wheel and glowed red as it fell, some residents said. It cooled to gray after landing in a thicket, flattening trees and bushes.”

That glowing ring of metal was eight feet in diameter and over 1100 pounds; it had flown through the sky, and landed in some brush. It turns out it is a piece of space garbage, debris from old equipment that has been orbiting the earth long after its intended use. Though it caused no death or injury to the village residents or their livestock, they remain traumatized, and hope to find accountability for this massive dump of extraterrestrial junk onto their land.

As nations have charted their exploration of space as the final frontier, and even private corporations like SpaceX have also tried to put their imprint on the cosmos, that quest to harness resources beyond our green Earth have been paved with the same carelessness that has robbed the Earth of natural resources and has threatened its long-term sustainability to begin with.

Much closer than Kenya, across New Jersey and even in nearby states, many have puzzled over the heavens as they have witnessed glowing lights hovering above them. Have you spotted one? While some make conspiracies about visits from extraterrestrial beings, or an elaborate spy operation by foreign operatives, or a top-secret scheme cooked up by the United States’ own CIA, the official line from the Federal Aviation Administration and the Department of Defense insist

that these sightings are nothing out of the ordinary— they are merely “lawful commercial drones, hobbyist drones, and law enforcement drones, as well as manned fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and stars mistakenly reported as drones.” Not only that, but the phenomenon of a few people seeing these and reporting them on social media makes others look at the sky a little more carefully than normal, noticing things that may have been there all along but seeing them with new eyes. All that in addition to the probability that with all the buzz about drone sightings, more people are sending their hobby drones up into the air to be part of what is happening.

The magi also saw something spectacular and beyond ordinary explanation in the skies. They were not kings, though the Christian tradition later interpreted them to be kings; instead, they were astrologers, likely coming from Persia. As astrologers, they examined the sky.

How divorced we are from the quiet grandeur of simply watching the night sky, when there are no artificial lights or noises around. It puts you in touch with the rhythm of creation, and the One who designed it. In our urban lives in New Jersey, we are left to watch drones, which are probably airplanes, and that’s only if we even bother to step outside. Hopefully you have found a chance, outside of our urban rhythms, to occasionally experience darkness the ways our biblical ancestors did. Darkness was rich, and with no other distractions around, the stars and other astronomical wonders held center stage. Surely the sky had revealed other celestial wonders: a comet, perhaps, or a shining planet. But the Bethlehem star caught the attention of the magi in ways that drew them from the East, all the way to Jerusalem. Perhaps the star shone for all to see, but only the magi saw enough significance in it to see it, *and* follow it. It seems none of the Jerusalem locals, who were much closer to Bethlehem than Persia, had done that.

One thing I have especially grown to appreciate about living and worshiping in this multicultural community is the chance to hear perspectives I never may have come to on my own. Whether it is the questions and the eager faith of a new convert to Christianity coming from a country that has only a very slim minority of Christians, or the ways of expressing spirituality that may at first seem strange, but can offer a depth of holy experience if we allow it, the observations we get from those whose first language is not English often enriches my faith.

One of our Korean church participants shared with me the power of one prayer practice in the Korean church, when all in the church pews are invited to pray at once— out loud— whatever they need to say to God. I imagine this church could try this and would at first find they have heavy tongues. But I wonder if there could also be a spiritual freedom to hear the prayers of our own hearts be carried off with the prayers of neighbors around us, could there even be a holy catharsis in this practice, if we made ourselves vulnerable enough to try it? At a minimum, in a church like ours, if you are a native English speaker and you take the time to stop the conversation and ask the opinion of a newer English speaker in your committees or your bible study, you will usually be rewarded in what you hear and what you find from sharing your attention and noticing how they are paying attention.

Many people overlook the fact that the star does not lead the magi directly to Bethlehem. Instead, it leads them roughly 7 miles away, to Jerusalem. It would be as if some wise folks were trying to see something happening in Leonia, but the star led them to midtown Manhattan. Jerusalem was not the city of David, but the city of the Temple, and also the seat of power for the chief priests and for Herod, who had declared himself “King of the Jews.”

Herod was Jewish but he was insecure, not inspired. He was desperate, rather than dependent on God. Herod was Idjumaean, likely from the region of Petra. The Idjumaean were converts to Judaism, not descendents from the 12 tribes. He put the *ish* in Jewish— and it seems that he was unstable in his religious identity. Perhaps to prove his credentials, he accomplished amazing feats such as rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, but he also acted ruthlessly toward the very people he served. Still he found favor through the Romans, and his rule came from the Romans having his back rather than winning over the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. He murdered family members and others he feared would try to usurp him. So although only Matthew reports this of Herod flying into a murderous rage, and in the verses after our passage today, killing all the infants born in Bethlehem at Jesus’ time, this sort of act tracks with other things historians report on Herod.

Herod called himself “King of the Jews.” So when these outsider magi showed up, asking, “Where is the king of the Jews?” they mean it as an innocent question- not as a challenge to his authority— but Herod takes it as a direct insult

and a threat to his power. Herod calls the religious leaders to get their expertise—perhaps this is because he doesn't know his scriptures and the prophecies, so he doesn't have the rich context to begin to search for what the coming of a messiah might mean. Like other political leaders we may know of, Herod uses the religion for his own ends but is not deeply engaged in it himself.¹

But Matthew reports that all of Jerusalem was frightened, along with Herod. Why might this be? If God's people had been waiting their whole lives, even, for generation upon generation, for the coming of the Messiah, why would the announcement of the arrival stir so much fear?

Well, consider something bold you have done: a change, or a choice you made. How did you feel about that change, choice, or action? If it was anything that mattered, whether good or bad, chances are this action was accompanied by fear. Even if something emerges that you know may be according to God's call and God's plan— maybe, especially when that happens— it can be terrifying. We would much rather be in a dress rehearsal for our faith, than asked to actually perform it: to risk giving something up, forsaking our comfort, or doing something that would require us to change in ways that really matter.

So, maybe that is why it took people coming in from the outside, rather than those experts who grew up rehearsing for the coming of the Messiah, who could really recognize Jesus for who he was. I remember that even though I had come out to myself my first year in college, it was not until I studied abroad in Beijing that I was actually ready to come out to my friends, my family, and to the church. There was something about being a stranger in a strange land that really prepared me to step into the discomfort that coming out would bring, and the strangeness with which I knew people would see me. But in doing so, I became much more at home with myself and even with God, and my relationships became more connected.

I also find it interesting that these people from afar initially don't get all the way to Bethlehem. At first, the star leads them to Jerusalem. They get some info from the stars, some from the priests, but it takes a hodgepodge of people in order to find the way. The ones who pay attention don't have the prophecies.

¹ Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*, Epiphany 2022

The ones who have the prophecies don't pay attention. They need each other in order for it all to make sense.

Here is a lesson for the church, especially in this time of transition. No one can carry the way to Jesus on their own. You need each other. Some of you have enough faith, but perhaps not enough focus. Others are well focused, but lack faith. You each have different gifts and skills, and you need one another to pull it off. Before I leave this church, you will be asked to fill out a Time and Talent form, sharing where you are willing to volunteer in the church, or serve on committees. Even if you are unsure that what you have to offer isn't quite what the church needs, chances are high that the chemistry of what you bring, matched with the gifts that someone else brings, and touched by what the Holy Spirit brings, is exactly what the church needs.

Here we are in a new year, and at the cusp of a big change in the church. Where is it that you can find the clarity to really look at the dark canvass of the night sky, and see where God's light is pulling you? Where God's light is pulling the church?

Keep an eye on the star. And keep an eye on the entrance. Be open to who is coming and going. Offer hospitality to the stranger, the guest who may come from afar. They may have something to teach you of the holy that you really need to hear. Pay attention to the goings as well. When people leave and do not come back, pursue them in love, but not in judgment.

Finally, do not take the cosmos God has given us— the heavens and the earth, and those made of stardust within— for granted.