

Epiphany of the Lord  
January 3, 2010  
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## FOLLOWING THE STAR

Matthew 2:1-12

Series: *This We Believe*

One of the things in my personal mission statement for the New Year is to learn more about astronomy. I know very little really about our universe beyond planet earth, our moon and our solar system. Every year at this time on Epiphany Sunday when we read the story of the Wise Men following the star to Bethlehem I'm reminded of my knowledge deficit regarding the universe—constellations, stars, asteroids, planets, moons and all the rest.

So I usually check in with the MacDonald's Observatory website to see if there's something new or different going on out there in space. And sure enough there is. For example, last week we had a full moon for the second time in a month, commonly called a "Blue Moon." The last full moon was Dec. 2. The expression, "once in a blue moon," indicates that it's something of a rarity because it only happens every 2.5 years. A full moon on New Year's Eve is even more exceptional and won't occur again until 2028—when I'm 97 years old! So, I'm glad I got to see it this time around!

Another thing about our New Year's full moon is that it was a Long Night Moon, meaning that it was in view longer than any other full moon of the year, around 14 or 15 hours. The full moon does the opposite of what the sun does in our sky. Since there's not much sunlight, there's a lot of moonlight, the sun is low in the sky, the moon is high.

And this full moon on New Year's Eve was smack in the middle of the constellation Gemini, the twins. The bright stars that represent the heads of the twins—Pollux and Castor—were to the left of the moon. Pollux was the brighter of the two, 34 light years from earth, meaning that's how long takes for the star's actual light seen by the naked eye to travel to earth! Amazing. Well, there's a lot going on in our solar system and universe that I do not know about, given my geocentric, earth-bound perspective. That's why learning more about it is on my personal mission statement for 2010. There's no telling what God is up to out there that we need to know about!

Thank goodness for those intelligent stargazers called "magi" who noticed the appearance of an unusual star that guided them to Bethlehem where Jesus our Messiah was born! The story of the "Wise Men," astrologers from the East, is found only in Matthew's gospel. Luke focuses attention on Mary and Joseph, pilgrims with no place to stay,

relegated to a stable where their baby was born. Luke tells of shepherds—humble, unpretentious people. The setting is among the ordinary, the poor, the powerless.(1)

Matthew, on the other hand, talks about travelers who journey all the way from distant Persia or Babylon bearing gifts of great expense—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The primary action in Matthew’s story takes place in the palace of a king. The minor characters are educated people—people of power and influence in the community. Only Matthew says that what prompted the drama that unfolded around the birth of Jesus—all the travel and conversation and deception—was a star. “We have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”(2:2)

What in the world did the Magi see that prompted them to make such a journey to see the newborn king? Perhaps a supernova releasing a tremendous burst of light and energy? Or the aurora borealis, blazing in the heavens? Or a configuration of planets that seemed to lead them across the desert sand? What was it? All kinds of theories have been devised to explain the star leading astrologers to Bethlehem.

But Matthew’s interest is theological rather than astrological. Matthew is telling this story to the early church and to us for specific

reasons. For example, Matthew wants us to know that the first people to realize that a king had been born in Israel were not church folk. They were Gentiles, foreigners.

Israel, of course, was hoping that God would send someone to liberate them from Roman occupation and restore the freedom and glory experienced during the rule of King David. They called this person the “Messiah,” in Hebrew. In Greek, messiah becomes “Christ.” According to Matthew, however, believers were not the first to know the Messiah had been born. Rather, it was non-believers. Matthew wants the church to know from the very beginning that Jesus isn’t limited to the community of faith. Jesus is for everybody: Israelites and foreigners, insiders and outsiders.

Historically, one of the first controversies that threatened to undo the early church shortly after Jesus’ death and resurrection was whether Christianity was limited to Jew, or whether Gentiles—people like you and me—could become Christian also. The Apostle Paul, a Jew whose ministry took place primarily among Gentiles, was very clear about it: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”(Gal. 3:28)

So, Matthew's story of the stargazers serves as a warning to the church in every age, to you and me: Church folk must never, ever, claim that we are the only ones who possess the whole truth about God. We must not assert that we are the only ones who know the mind of God or the will of God or the means by which God is revealed to the world. Why? First, because we are human, not God, and therefore fallible. Second, because such truth claims imply that we are somehow better, smarter, or more faithful than others, thus separating us from people whose experience may be different. Such claims can lead to conflict and violence, as any careful reader of the Bible and student of religious history knows. Matthew just wants us to know that what happened over there in Bethlehem is for everybody and that God doubtlessly works outside the church to lead people to Christ.

Another thing that Matthew wants us to know is that these wise men from the east were seekers. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"(2:2)

O.K., guys, listen up: Wise men ask for directions! I know that your wife or significant other has told you this repeatedly and you've resisted, though hopelessly lost. Now you have no excuse. It's in the Bible! Right there in the Gospel according to Matthew. It's part of the Christmas story: wise men asking for directions to Bethlehem, receiving

directions and journeying on to deliver their gifts to the Christ Child. So, you don't have to wander around attempting to find your destination without benefit of a map or directions. It's OK to ask. It's no reflection on your knowledge, abilities, or manhood. Wise men do that. You'll get to your destination more quickly and, more importantly, your spouse and friends will appreciate you more.

The Wise Men were seekers. Faith, as one theologian put it, is always in search of understanding. In that sense, all people of faith are seekers. I certainly am—and I've been a member of the church practically all of my life. I love the scriptures, but I can't claim to know and understand them fully. I believe in God with all my heart but I cannot claim to understand all that God wants of me. I love Jesus but it isn't always clear what being a disciple entails in these complex times. I believe the creeds but some of the doctrines of the church remain a great mystery to me. I'm still a work in progress where faith, understanding and practice are concerned. Still searching, like those Wise Ones who were guided by the star to Jesus.

Maybe you are a seeker, curious about who Jesus is and what it means to be a Christian. Maybe you are looking for and needing a

new direction for your life. Maybe you are wondering if there's any cosmic significance to life, or if it's just accidental. If so, I want to assure you that it's OK to ask. Wise people are those who investigate, who come and see for themselves what faith is about, who learn from one another. You'll be right at home among us because we are all seeking Christ in some way or other.

There's another thing that is abundantly clear in Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus: the Wise Men from the east know *when* the new king is born but they do not know *where*. They must go to Jerusalem and inquire of those who are steeped in the scriptures and tradition of faith. Only then will they know: "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet."(2:5)

The Bible is the story of God's revelation to people who struggle, not always successfully, to be faithful. It's the story of God's great love for humanity and God's great desire for all to have abundant life and to be liberated from the captivities that prevent them from doing so. It's the story of those who have sought God's guidance and together have made the journey to Bethlehem, sometimes again and again, to experience the rebirth of grace and hope in our lives.

The quest of those people from the east could not be complete until they had encountered the God revealed in the scripture and wisdom of the community of faith. They found what they were looking for because of star and scripture. One knew when, the other knew where. Both were necessary.

Matthew says that after the Wise Men had paid homage to the new king born in Bethlehem they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they went home by another route. According to Matthew, what occurred over in Bethlehem began with a star inviting outsiders and insiders alike on a journey of faith to the One whose rule transforms human life through love and faith. There are many stars in our universe. Matthew says that the one to follow is the one that leads you to Bethlehem where you can find the One that can change the whole direction of your life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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1. Michael W. Moody, “. . . we observed his star at its rising,” *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Winter 2005.