

“Stars & Strangers”
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Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men, or astrologers, from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east, and have come to pay him homage.” **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘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.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** 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.” **9** When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** 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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon:

Was that star a comet? A supernova? No astronomers have been able to identify it, much to my sorrow. I love stellar phenomena. But no, this isn't the explosion that created the Crab Nebula, that came much later in 1054. No, it is not Halley's comet or any other we know of...

So then,

What if there was no star? Especially a star that moves, then stops in a specific place? What did Matthew mean by putting such a thing in his gospel story of the birth of Jesus anyway?

Could it be that he wanted to share the impact of this birth, as other ancient storytellers of the time did as well? Stars as signs, stars and comets as portents of great or of gloomy things, were well understood. Comets, storms, volcanic eruptions cause people all over the world to wonder, and religious groups of every stripe, have members who wonder, and sometimes declare, there are divine messages in these things.

But I don't get that from a star.

The signs that surprise me, the portents that make me tremble, or wonder, are more often political portents, societal changes.

I find meaning in them, yes, I often do.

And I find meaning in people, and in new experiences. I find deep meaning in my dreams, it's not just Joseph and the angels who listen to the messages of their dreams.

So, when I look at this text today, I am drawn to pondering, and ask myself...Andy, **who or what led you to seek Jesus? Who aided your search for God?**

I have further hints in this story: the magi, the magicians, the astrologers...are **strangers, outsiders, foreigners**. They have a mighty impact on Herod and the court in Jerusalem, who become anxious and afraid, and filled with anger. Yet the magi trust the sign they have found, and they follow it; to the moment when they experience **profound and overwhelming joy** finding "the child with his mother" (vs. 10).

So, not only am I looking for people or experiences that were sign posts for me, pointing me into closer relationship with the Holy One...but I am also looking for what happens to me, to my heart and soul, when I draw near to the Holy One.

And that answer is overwhelming joy, and thankful praise (vs. 11)

Because I can look around and see meaning in what my life is, the directions I have taken, the hardships that I have learned from, I can look around and see messengers of God too, all around me.

Some signs were big and loud, some quiet and gentle; some of the messengers were strangers to me, way outside my comfort zone, like the Magi in Jerusalem.

- I humbly remember the young charismatic, lesbian, Roman Catholic woman who challenged me to look for God's presence in my relationships every day.
- She was a sharp teacher for an intense moment of God seeking in my life, urging me to look deeper than I had up to that time in my life.
- I remember my parents and the bathing in love and protection that led me to know what real love was, what home could be, with the love of 9 people to hold me through thick and thin (6 brothers and sisters, my parents, and my maternal grandmother who lived with us for many years.)
- I remember the atheist professor who felt I was wasting my talents in theology. Her criticism stung, but it also strengthened my resolve!
- I remember the dean of the religious studies department at Regis University, who gently urged me on; and how delighted I was to learn more and more and more.

Once I start looking through the stories of my life, I see stars and strangers, filled with powerful assistance and guidance, scattered throughout the whole of my life.

This is not an accident.

For the Holy One, our God, seeks us with longing. Loves us without distinction. Cherishes our lives.

And how can I be sure of this?

Because the stars and the strangers led me down a path towards love and joy. A path that was filled with people who were compassionate, and who were exciting and challenging.

People who would pick me up when I stumbled.
Experiences that would test me, try me, and sometimes make me weep in the dark.
Yet, upon reflection, gave deeper meaning to my being and my life.
Teaching me Compassion. Humility. Hospitality.

And gifting me with Joy.

There is darkness and there is danger, of course there is. The evil that Herod is sign and symbol of, did truly exist, and exists still.

But no darkness or danger can eliminate the love of God, the hunger in our souls to find God and be embraced by the joyful, generous love of God, to fall down in praise and thanks for this huge immensity of Love and Joy and Light!

The beginning of the gospel of John tells us: “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.”

Paul’s letter to the Romans assures us: “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”.

The “star” that points you to the love of God may be a perfect sunny day in the mountains, or by the river, or in a garden. It might be a true love’s kiss, or a baby, or a majestic tree in the forest, or a great work of art.

The strangers who guide you on your way filled with joy and knowledge could be a pastor, or a plumber, a jail warden, or a teacher, or an immigrant neighbor. A guy on a train. A kid with a water hose. The possibilities are infinite.

I urge you: LOOK. Look into your life, and see, and rejoice, in the stars and strangers who lead you to Jesus, who lead you to the God who loves you. Find them, and then, offer your thanks and praise to God!

Halleluiah!

Amen!