

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 6, 2019
Feast of the Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 60:1-9
Psalm 72:1-2, 10-17
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

I'm not sure exactly what it is about us human beings, but we seem to have a fascination with stars. It's understandable, I suppose. If you have ever looked up into a clear night sky on a summer evening, the fascination is understandable.

Consider when you were a child. Most likely, one of the first songs you learned was:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are;
Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky;
Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.*

And not only are we fascinated by stars, but often times our preoccupation with stars involves their ability to have some kind of magical power. Consider, for example:

*Star light, star bright; first star I've seen tonight;
I wish I may, I wish I might have the wish I wish tonight.*

And who among us, whether young or old, has not at some point joined our voice with others who sang:

*When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are;
Anything your heart desires can come to you.*

For whatever reason, there is just something about stars that captivates us.

I'd like to tell you a story today, the story of a star. The story begins in the Old Testament book of Numbers, where the children of Israel have fled Egypt and are on their way to the Promised Land. Balak, the King of Moab, is afraid that he will be defeated by the advancing Israelites, so he calls on a prophet named Balaam to come and to put a curse on the Israelites.

It's a long story, but eventually Balaam convinces Balak that he cannot thwart God's leading of the children of Israel to the Promised Land. He speaks a message of prophecy, and in that message he says:

*I see him [the Almighty] but not in the present time; I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A **star** will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel.*

[Numbers 24:16-17]

More than a thousand years later, the story of this star continued. We read about it in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod, Magi from the East come and say: "Where is he who has been born the King of the Jews? For we have seen his **star** in the East, and have come to worship him."

These men did not make the long and dangerous journey merely out of intellectual curiosity. Their journey cost them, more than they (or we) could know.

T.S. Eliot captures some of this in his poem, *Journey of the Magi*. The poem is written from the perspective of one of the Magi:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty, and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

.....

*And so we continued and arrived at evening,
Not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down this,
Set down this:
Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?
There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. [T.S. Eliot]*

These Magi endured that painful journey not out of idle intellectual curiosity, but out of the need to *worship*. The star in that sky that they followed at great cost was the star *that was promised to rise from Jacob*, the scepter who was to emerge from Israel.

This is confirmed by Zechariah, John the Baptist's father. Luke's Gospel tells us that after John is born, Zechariah breaks forth in a song of praise. The Latin title of this song is the *Nunc Dimittis*, and in those traditions that observe Morning Prayer, it is a standard feature of the Morning Office.

Zechariah speaks forth that John will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give the people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. And then we have these powerful words: "By the tender mercy of our God, the *dawn* from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Come with me now to the end of the story, which occurs at the end of your New Testaments. One of Jesus' friends, a disciple named John, had been banished to the remote island of Patmos for preaching about Jesus. While he was there, he experienced a vision where Jesus showed him how God was going to bring His plan for saving His people to its grand conclusion.

Near the end of the vision, Jesus says these words to John: “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this message for the churches. I am both the source of David and the heir to his throne. *I am the bright morning star.*” (Rev. 22:16, NLT)

We human beings have a fascination with stars. But the message of Epiphany (also called the Gentile Christmas) is that Jesus is THE star! His birth ushered in the bright sunlight of a new day! And according to John’s vision, Christ ushers in the *eternal* day! He is the bright Morning Star, and when the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, there will be no night there, for the bright Morning Star is the Light!

We are fascinated by stars. *But have you ever hitched your life to one? Have you ever pinned all of your hopes and dreams on one? Have you laid aside everything you hold dear in order to follow one?*

I can’t promise you that it will be easy should you decide to follow the star that appeared in the Bethlehem sky. In fact, it will likely be the opposite. In the poet’s words, you may have a hard time of it. You may find in some ways that it is like a *death* of sorts. But by the grace of God: follow that star! By the grace of God, make the pursuit of that star the burning passion of your life. In the end, you’ll be eternally grateful that you did.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.