

Secret Stars

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Epiphany (a bit early) - January 3, 2021

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 60:1-6

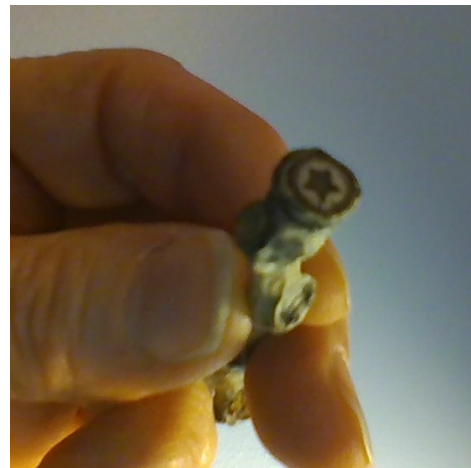
Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

GOSPEL READING Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet [Micah]: *'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.'*" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. **Thanks be to God.**

Just before Christmas this year, the appearance of a “Star of Bethlehem” got a lot of play on the internet. This picture, taken from the Ball State observatory in Indiana, is one image of a rare phenomenon that I, for one, missed due to cloudy nights - though others here did see it. In fact, this amazing light is not really a star, but the conjunction of two planets, Jupiter and Saturn. But it drew our attention back to a place our eyes often fail to go: the heavens. It pulled people’s hearts back to the stories told by the night sky, stories told in darkness, where the smallest of the celestial lights - the stars - shine brightest. The Wise Ones, as we imagine them, traveled by night, reading in the brilliant light of an unusual star this story of great promise: a new king’s birth. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who includes this strange and wonderful tale of the Magi’s steadfast hope, Herod’s lethal jealousy and fear, and the worship of the infant Jesus by foreign visitors bearing royal gifts, fulfilling prophecies uttered long before.



Carole Kinion Copeland, artist and nature lover, drew my gaze to stars much nearer home: the secret stars of the cottonwood tree. The Dakota people, who observe the world more closely than most of us, tell the story that when the world was new, one curious little star left heaven to explore, everywhere. The place that tugged at this star’s heart was filled with the happy sounds of music and laughter - the sounds of human community. Reluctantly, this star returned to the heavens, but it found it missed the wonderful sounds of earth. Its star siblings cautioned it to remain in the sky; if it tried to live on earth, they said, its dazzling presence would surely disrupt and harm human life. But, the little star asked, what if I kept my presence secret - then could I live near enough to hear the delightful sounds? Then the other stars agreed, and the little star crept into the twigs of the cottonwood tree, where it may be found to this day. When human sounds of love and laughter prevail, the little star rejoices.¹

For as long as humans have gazed at the heavens, they have found stars that carry stories: of Orion the Hunter, Casseopeia the Queen, the Pleiades or Seven Sisters. Enslaved Americans pinned their hopes of freedom on following the North Star - part of the drinking gourd, or Dipper constellations. Sadly, the artificial lights of civilization obscure the ancient lights of heaven. It’s said that 2/3s of people in the United States are no longer able to discern the luminous swath of brightness that is our home galaxy, the Milky Way.² What wisdom have we lost, along with our view of the stars? What stories have we forgotten? What truths have gone unobserved?

¹https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/education_safety/education/plt/activity_sheets/star-cottonwood-tree-lesson-story.pdf

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

The stars follow their courses serenely unaware of our gaze, or our neglect. Jupiter and Saturn were not really close at all this December; they just appeared as one to us. The constellations that guided ships across the sea had no idea that they were doing so. Human imagination, human longing, the human hunger for understanding imparts meaning to the patterns we see in the stars, and reads in them messages of God's promise. But if the Bible tells us that God numbers the stars and calls them each by name (Ps. 147:4), who am I to question? Why wouldn't God reach out to us through the eternal dance of the night sky, or through the secret stars hidden in the cottonwoods? God speaks in mysterious ways; we may listen, and - like the Wise Ones - follow. Following in the darkness, often, because the stars don't appear in the day.

How is God speaking today? And how should we follow? We have come through dark times in the year just past; but that very darkness has illuminated corners of our world that our artificial light and self-assumed importance had hidden from us: vast inequities among races and among nations; it has revealed the very narrow line that so many people walk between just enough and not enough to live. In some ways, it took this darkness for us to see the light. It took a time of isolation for us to recognize our common humanity. Like the little star of the cottonwood tree, we needed a time of separation to realize how much we hunger for the sounds of human community in music, love, and laughter, how much we yearn for human touch.

There is light now at the end of our dark tunnel - or so we are assured. What happens when we emerge? In re-reading the Christmas story, I'm reminded that the Wise Ones didn't stay and follow Jesus the newborn king in a revolution against Herod and Rome, but returned to their own country to do - who knows what? We don't know. The shepherds who hastened to Bethlehem following the angels' instruction were not, as far as we know, among the twelve called as disciples by the Good Shepherd; he favored fishermen. But no one who followed the star or obeyed the command of the angels left Bethlehem unchanged. The Wise Ones took a different road home; they no longer bowed to earthly kings. The shepherds returned praising God for all they had seen and heard. And Mary pondered all these things in her heart. The baby in the feeding trough gave them all, well, food for thought.

What are you thinking of this Epiphany, at the start of this new year? The word "Epiphany" means showing forth - making plain the truth of God; Epiphany stories are all about God's light shining on people who weren't sure what would happen if they stepped outside of routine. But they all dared the darkness; they dared to question; they dared to risk everything to find out. And each one found something different. The stories of Christmas and Epiphany remind us that contemplation and action are two sides of one coin. The Wise Ones watched the night sky, and when the time came to travel, they set out. Shepherds spent long periods of solitude in the hills, guarding their sheep, until they got the word to go to Bethlehem. Then they wasted no time. Prayer yields wisdom; time spent alone with God bears practical, compassionate fruit in the

world, or it's not really prayer at all, it's just self-indulgence, self-absorption. The fruit your prayer brings forth depends on you.

I think often of the unlikely partnership of the Chosen Generation, and the Rochester Quakers, who rent space from them. We heard from Pastor Dayo Dosumu before Thanksgiving about the work of Chosen Generation's Lifegate Services. They are Pentacostal: they worship with electric guitars and drums; they speak in tongues. The Quakers worship in silence, and most often don't speak at all. We laugh about it together: "We are very noisy," they say to the Quakers, "and you are very quiet." And yet, we agree, it's the same God leading both congregations. They focus on immediate response to local food insecurity; the Quakers lobby legislators for peaceful solutions to global problems. Both kinds of action are the fruit of prayer, the inner instruction of the Spirit. Last week we heard from Dr. Lis Valle a provocative call to hear people of this country who are crying out for justice, hungry bodies crying for food. Her insights flowed from women telling their own stories, from women striving to feed their families, and working together to change unjust laws. Each path is genuinely guided by the same God. What is our path?

On this first Sunday of 2021, we see a year of hope shining ahead of us. What path will we follow? Which star will you look to for guidance for your life this year, what story will your life tell in response? Which constellation will this congregation use to navigate our way into an unknown future? For certain, a journey begun in prayer and contemplation, in search of God's will, will lead to actions we can hardly imagine today. We will know our work is of God when its fruit is the happy sound of music, love, and laughter, of whole and healthy human community. Then the stars in the heavens will smile as they dance above us, and the secret stars of the cottonwood will be full of joy. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

Holy One, lowly One, light in our darkness, show us the way to healthy, happy human community. Show us the way we should go. When the night seems darkest, kindle a fire in our hearts that never dies away. May the paths be straight for timely vaccinations against covid for those who need it most. May the light of truth and justice illuminate the needs of so many in our society, in our world. May nations and peoples who seek equal treatment receive all that they deserve; may we, in the wealthiest of nations, never presume we deserve more than others.

Jesus, you are the light of the world, a light no darkness can overcome. As the year dawns, we look to you to lead us in the ways we need to go. We are your people; may we act as your people; may we be your hands and feet and voice, encouraging and nurturing healthy human

community. We call to mind the troubles of the recent past: may we see above and beyond human disputes.

We pray for all your children undergoing trials of every sort: for all health care workers who are stressed by the surging numbers; for teachers and students back in school; for those for whom health and strength are returning; for all those who are in care facilities and isolated from family and friends. And fill with your comfort every heart where an empty space looms, because a loved one has died. You, our God, still make the end of life a new beginning. For this we thank and praise you in Jesus' name. Amen

Communion

The Spirit of Peace be with you; **and also with you.**
Lift up your hearts; **we lift them to our God;**
Let us give thanks to the one who speaks peace to all people.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is surely a good and joyful thing to offer thanks and praise to the Prince of Peace,
our Comforter, and Guide;
Who entered our human history through a woman's womb,
Who was born in a stable and slept in a feeding trough,
Yet drew the attention of wise stargazers, who honored him as king:
A king who became one of us and learned about human community as we do,
through the sounds of music, love, and laughter;
Therefore we praise you, our God, and with the heavenly choir and all the saints in glory:

Sing holy, holy, holy; sing holy, holy, holy,
Fill earth and heaven with glory, holy is our God.

In the night before his death at the hands of people
who had forgotten the song of the angels,
And turned their gaze away from dance of the stars,
Who let themselves be guided by pride and earthly ambition,
Jesus took bread and gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples,
Saying, "Take and eat. This is my body, bread for the hungry,
Life for the world. Do this, and remember me."

Again after supper, he took the cup and gave thanks to the Creator,
And gave it to all of them to drink, saying,
"Take and drink; this is the seal of my promise to you of forgiveness and freedom,

It is the cup of salvation, to quench the need of the thirsty
And refresh the weary. Do this and remember me,
For I will not eat and drink again in this way
Until I share the feast with you in God's eternal future."

But you, his saints, as often as *you* eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the love of our Shepherd until he comes again. And so we pray as he taught us, "Our Father..."