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Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12

A Star Is Born

I think it might be fair to say that we live in a culture obsessed with celebrities and fame. Among other things, the Feast of the Epiphany is about a star, and not just the celestial kind, but the celebrity kind too. This feast day is about one of the more joyous, dramatic and appealing stories of scripture. It has generated a long and very diverse history of Christian art and tradition. Some of that tradition is grounded in Matthew's story, and a lot of it is embroidered or extrapolated. We are told about wise men from the East (the Greek term is Magoi, the English is Magi). But Christian art sees them as kings, based upon Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72. We are told there are some wise men, but we see them as THREE wise men, based upon the three gifts they bring. We are told about a star that has led them from their homelands in the East, into Judea; but they need some help locating their exact destination. So they go to the rich and famous for some help: the king, the priests and scholars of the sumptuous Temple in Jerusalem. It is quite dramatic and deserves all the attention that tradition and art have lavished upon this story; and it really does appeal to our contemporary sense of drama, celebrity and fame. Trust me, if the *E! Channel* COULD cover this story, it WOULD!

So we have a story about a star, and its double-meaning is just as true for us as for the ancients. For us a star can be a light in the sky, <u>or</u> a famous person. For ancient Greeks, stars were not only points of light in the nighttime sky, both beautiful and necessary for navigation – they were celestial beings. Stars had their own souls and purposes. Each star was believed to be a God. For ancient Hebrews, stars were also beautiful and necessary, but they were something else too. They were created to witness to GOD's being and purposes. They were pointers announcing something greater than themselves. They were signposts, sort of like the angels, announcing 'look here! There is something you should see and know!' And in BOTH cultures, special stars flying across the sky, always announced the birth of a new king, or new age. Now, a lot of research, both respectable and specious, has taken place over the years about this story of the Magi and their star. I do not think it is ultimately useful or even desirable to solve the riddle of Matthew's star. Was it a supernova? A comet? An asteroid? Was it a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn? When exactly did this astrological event occur? Did it even happen? But the exact nature of this celestial occurrence is NOT Matthew's concern. What <u>is</u> his concern is this: the story of Jesus' birth is a

preview of the conflict to come. It sets out the parameters, from the first chapters, of the action and conflict of his whole Gospel. It prepares us for the characters and plot, which drive the whole story to its conclusion, 28 chapters later. What we have here is a preview of the struggle between the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdoms of this age. Matthew is very clear about the level and nature of this struggle. His infancy narrative, his Christmas story, takes place in the world of kings and royalty, of high priests and scholars, the wealthy and the wise. The birth of Jesus is a matter of the highest import for Matthew, and it directly challenges the way WE think of power and how we define riches and fame. There are NO humble shepherds watching their flocks by night in this story! Matthew's version Christmas and Epiphany challenges us to think about our standards of wealth, celebrity, and power. Do they point to anything more significant than themselves? Does power have a purpose beyond its own enlargement?

So we have a story about what people admire and seek. We have a story about what they fear losing. We have a story about what they are willing to risk. The magi, whoever they were, were willing to risk a lot. As foreigners, they were unfamiliar with the Hebrew scriptures and the land of Judah. Yet they followed the light that they DID have. They obeyed the wisdom that they DID possess. The revelation THEY KNEW was written in what NATURE was telling them, not in the Bible. For them, the sky they studied announced a great happening and they decided to be part of that great happening personally. They didn't know where it would lead them. They didn't know how long the journey would be. They didn't know how much it would cost. And because of the times they lived in, they didn't know whether they would return alive. Nevertheless, they decided to act upon the knowledge they did have, the light of their own intelligence. These researchers did not merely admire or study a star. They decided to act upon what they saw. They followed the links, and accepted the consequences.

Matthew also tells us about other reactions to this revelation. These were the reactions of the king, the priests, and the scholars. These were the folks who DID possess the revelation of the scriptures. They studied it. They COULD answer the Magi's questions. Interestingly, although these folks HAD the answers, it is only the Magi, the foreigners who did not know the story of the Messiah, or the geography of the kingdom, who are able to ACT on their knowledge. It is the Magi, those unfamiliar with the stories of God's grace, who are most able to INTEGRATE grace into their lives. For them, it is NOT an academic exercise. It is a

life choice. And so, Matthew tells us a story about unlikely people, who find God and grace through unlikely choices. The unknowing find what the knowing ignore, and there are still consequences when this happens.

Epiphany means 'manifestation,' an unveiling, a showing forth, an announcement. Christian tradition celebrates the Epiphany to remind us that the grace of God is for the good of the WHOLE world; that it transcends ALL groups, all cultures, times and places. It marks the transition in the story of Jesus' birth, from a personal event in the lives of Mary and Joseph, to an interpersonal event in the life of the world. For Matthew, this birth becomes a majestic, cosmic event. THAT is why the story says "King Herod… and ALL Jerusalem was disturbed." For them this star wasn't sweet or beautiful. It was a direct confrontation to Herod's power, gold, and ego! In Herod's world there was only room for ONE star, which is why the first consequence of this story is a bloodbath – the massacre of Bethlehem's children.

So what kind of stars do WE follow? Are they stars that point to themselves, to their own power, their own fame, their own purposes? Or are they the kind of stars that point to God's power and God's purposes? The kind of stars that may not be famous at all. Maybe, they are sitting right next to you?! And if we notice these stars, will we follow the light they show us? If we see this kind of light, will we be merely fascinated? Will we stop and be impressed with ourselves? Or will we take up the challenge and follow where it leads?

The challenge of the Star of Bethlehem, and the challenge of the Magi, is precisely in how we integrate grace and nature. How do we integrate and live out the promptings of the Spirit with the world that WE know and live in, with the challenges and knowledge that WE have. There IS great comfort in the universal message of the Epiphany; great comfort in the idea that the love of God is for all people in all times. But the challenge of the Epiphany is in what we DO with that announcement. Will we follow that star, that LIGHT, into the presence of grace, or will we be merely STAR-STRUCK? That was the choice of the Magi, who followed the links without fear. It was the choice of King Herod and the scribes, who sought to deny what nature showed them, and snuff out what scripture told them. And it is our choice too. But PLEASE, remember one thing in this coming new year: **Jesus doesn't need any more FANS … He needs DISCIPLES**.

References

M.E. Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew*. NIB VIII. 1995, pp. 138-145.