

Star Power
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

The confirmation class of a church (certainly not in Cleveland) was being quizzed about their biblical knowledge. The teacher asked, "Where was Jesus born?" A kid in the back waved his hand, "I know, I know: Pittsburgh!" When the teacher gently corrected him with "No, it's Bethlehem" he grumbled, "Well, I knew it was somewhere in Pennsylvania."

While we Ohioans might never confuse the hometown of our savior with our rival city to the east, I wonder whether we too miss the place. Do we see that the God of highest heaven has come to earth, appeared in our town, and set the night on fire, ablaze with God's grace and glory.

*Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight.
I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.*

I don't know how the custom of wishing on a star developed but maybe it's because since the very beginning, humans have used the night sky for navigation, to find their way in the darkness. It's not surprising then that almost every culture and religion use physical light as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment. A star...a single candle held aloft...a light bulb over the head...all suggest revelation, an epiphany, an "aha" moment when what was previously clouded or shrouded in darkness is brought to light. The biblical narrative of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Matthew entwines these two themes. The wisemen, ancient Persian astrologers, interpreted the appearance of a particular star as a sign that pointed to the fulfillment of a wish they had long desired. And then the star literally guided them to that place where they knelt in humble worship and offered gifts before an infant who they understood to be a king--- in fact, *the* king. We celebrate

epiphany today as the revealing of God's presence and power in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

But let me ask you: have you had an epiphany lately? Does Christ's appearance on earth so long ago shed light on the complexities of contemporary life? I appreciate the brilliant physicist Stephen Hawking's observation that within the next decade, science will be able to determine how the universe came into being. But science, he adds, will never be able to determine *why* it came into being. Can we yet look to a star for the answer? Bring to the reading of the familiar story your unfulfilled wishes, whatever hopes and fears you have today; whatever shadows obscure the light for you; the persistent questions or constraints in your own life that defy resolution. Hear God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the second chapter at the first verse. [MATTHEW 2:1-12]

One of my new year's resolutions was to exercise every day. I strode out of my house on Wednesday morning batting a thousand for the two-day-old new year. My friend Carol and I headed up Scarborough at a lively pace. Before we had gone two blocks, we encountered a boy, maybe nine years old, not anyone we knew, standing on a corner. As we approached, he called out to us, "Did you see the moon this morning?!" *What??!* The question caught me completely off guard. "Did you see the moon this morning?" he asked again. "It was so big and bright and looked really cool." And with that announcement, he turned back to his waiting. The thing is, I hadn't seen the moon that morning. I got up, took the dog out, made coffee, flipped open the newspaper and waited for Carol to show up. I felt a quick and surprising pang of loss, for missing a view that would have blessed the day~and for my lack of mindfulness to divine grace right in front of me. Yet I also felt gratitude for the wise boy who called me out of myself and reminded me to look, to see, to be amazed and glad.

The wise men (and their kin, including children and little old ladies) can be our teachers. No one knows how many years

they'd been pouring over star charts, scanning the night sky, trying to tease out meaning from the patterned movement of the universe. No one knows how many other astrologers seeing the same star scoffed at them for journeying far simply on the basis of their hope that the star's prophecy would be fulfilled. How many started the journey, but failed to persevere? How many got discouraged by the length of the journey, the dull and dreary conditions of the trek? How many settled for lesser visions? How many were so set on their own goals that they missed the full moon right in front of them?

The wise men remind us first of all that illumination is a gift coming to us; it is not something we somehow have to self-generate or cause to appear. It's not something we can produce or manufacture. It is not something we must earn, or a reward bestowed upon us for good behavior. It's really less about making resolutions than about receiving revelation. The light appears to us as a free gift from the One who is light.

But something IS required of us. We have to LOOK. We have to wake up. We have to search beyond our little lives and peer into the heart of the world. The places of pain and suffering. The night sky of shadows and longing. Look and see. See what God is doing. Find the places where God is at work. Discover the people and experiences where God is restoring and saving and making new. You and I can be mirrors reflecting that light, and together be a beacon which draws others to the light. Not because we see it all, but because we're looking for it, scanning the far horizon as well as the faces of our near and dear. The light of the world has come, and we have only to open our eyes and receive its warmth and illumination. In the Buddhist tradition it's called mindfulness, an intention to be fully aware. The Christian faith has prophets who warn us of the danger of falling asleep too soon. Arise, shine; for your light has come. O taste and see that the Lord is good!

So we begin this new year at the spiritual equivalent of the eye doctor's: the Lord's table, to eat and drink in the light, to have

our vision checked and corrections made. At this table we are reminded that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. We are given light that will illumine the deepest night, that will reveal God's grace at the heart of reality, even when it is obscured. We are called to become light-bearers, wise men and women in whose actions and by whose love others can find their way. I don't think it's coincidental that there were several wise men. Epiphanies seem to happen most often where there is communion; where there is a shared commitment to journey together toward the place where wishes are fulfilled, dreams become reality, where the Word becomes flesh. As the people of God known as Fairmount Presbyterian Church, let us look for the star, set our course by it, and move forward together.

As the ushers bring an offering of stars to you [USHERS, PLEASE START DISTRIBUTING STARS], I invite you to take one from the plates, and let its word illumine your life in 2007. Consider what God may be calling you to do or to become through the light of this star. Put your star in a place where you will see it daily. You might want to come back to the question a few weeks or even months from now. Try jotting down some reflections about how you see your life or faith affected by this exercise. Some of you have told me about your experiences in doing this last year, and I'd love to hear those stories and the places in your lives you've found transformed. Your insights can become a witness to the light of Christ for the rest of us. Friends, in the biblical story, the wise men were guided to return home "another way;" they weren't the same at the journey's end that they were at its beginning. This is an enterprise of faith. You and I can only imagine the ways we'll be changed because we tried to walk in the light of the Lord, in the power of the star of Bethlehem.

[WHEN ALL STARS ARE DISTRIBUTED] Please join responsively in the biblical affirmation of faith [BULLETIN]

Friends, go out from here to where God is calling us. Go out with courage, perhaps not knowing exactly where to go, but confident that God's hand is leading us and God's love supporting us, through Jesus Christ the light of the World.

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