

Following the Star

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2021

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²In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We are celebrating Epiphany, the story of stars and maji and the way they came, and the new road they took home.

The final Christmas writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that were to be part of the message on Christmas Eve, but never made it in, are just right for today. He and his finance Maria are meditating on the season -

He from Tegel prison, for working against Hitler Maria from her home, alone, at Christmas' End.

Dietrich

“I think we’re going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious. The emptier our hands, the better we understand. The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ’s home on earth.”

Maria Wedemeyer -

I’m in the dark depths of night, and my thoughts are roaming far afield. Now that all the merry-making and rejoicing and candlelight are over and the noise and commotion of the day have been replaced by silence, inside and out, other voices can be heard.... The chill night wind and the mysterious darkness can open hearts and release forces that are unfathomable, but good and consoling.... Can you think of a better time than night-time? That’s why Christ, too, chose to come to us—with his angels—at night

Most nights, after my neighbors have gone to bed, I take a walk, companioned by our retriever, Bella. I take in the night air, the sky, the quiet. It feels so safe. I walk on by lit houses, sure that if I needed help I could call out, and neighbors would come to my aid.

A few nights ago, as I walked, I thought for the first time, I think of how it might feel to be a man of color, walking those streets at night, with a big dog. Thinking that it might be impossible for him to do so in most neighborhoods without someone being afraid not **for** him, as they might **for** me, a woman alone, but **of** him.

The unholiness of this difference shatters my peace.

I think of Bonhoeffer's words:

The emptier our hands, the better we understand. The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ's home on earth."

My hands are so full, my quarters so rich, is my heart Christ's home, really. I walk on mindful of how far I, we, have to go.

The maji had a long way to travel, too. The gifts they carried were costly, so they would have been people of means, and given up comfort to make this trek. They were traveling in a foreign land, seeking a holy king of another tradition. By a star that steadily, night by night, guided them on.

We have a fixed star in our sky - the North Star. You can see it at the tip of the handle of the Little Dipper, or the Drinking Gourd, as some called it. It is right on earth's rotational axis, so stays steady while the rest of the stars seem move around it. And should you walk toward it for 3458 miles to the north pole, that star, also called Polaris, would rise to be right overhead. Like the star the maji followed to Bethlehem which they told Herod they *saw at its rising*.

I saw a film the day after Christmas, *Midnight Sky*, the lead character says: to a young girl: *Polaris. You see it? It's the most important star in the sky. If you ever get lost, it'll help you find your way.*

I realize now, perhaps as much as ever in my life how important it is to get our bearings. To realize when we are off course.

Do you know that ancient Japanese saying: *My barn having burned to the ground, I can now see the moon?*

So much was burned down last year, so many of our illusions about our health care, our care for our elders, the state our equality, our democracy, our security were swept away.

We have realized our fragility, and truths that some already knew were in full view of the rest of us.

It's hard to see those truths in the light of day. It's hard to have my quiet evening walk interrupted by the sorrow of who cannot safely walk there.

But the gift of this awakening is this: that the star that the maji saw is still there, inviting us, me, you, first into the darkness, which, as Maria Wedemeyer said - *is full of silence that is unfathomable and good and consoling.*

And in that darkness, as all that is unessential falls away, we can look up and be led to Jesus, the Christ, our North Star, the light which around which our lives move.

Who invites us, shepherds and maji alike, to realize how poor we are, how empty handed we actually are, how in need of saving we are, and thus to realize how sought and welcomed, known and loved we are.

We are invited, each of us weary travelers, to move closer, night by night to that light, correcting course as we go, until the star is overhead and we bow down, with our whole selves and cry "holy".

For the word became flesh and dwelt among us; full of grace and truth.
John 1:14