

Which Star?
Matthew 2: 1-12

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We tend to read and to think of the stories describing the birth of Jesus like they are one continuous, unified narrative. Like the authors of Matthew and Luke sat down together and said, "I will tell this part of the story and you tell that part." But that is not what happened. And even though we read them together on Christmas Eve and push them together in our creches and cards, the narratives around the birth of Jesus are distinctly different and deserve to stand and to be thought about on their own. The account in Luke has one cast of characters. Matthew has another. Luke includes Caesar Augustus, Joseph and Mary, angels and shepherds and Jesus in a manger. Matthew has none of that.

Instead, Matthew's Gospel the primary actors are a star.

And, strangers from the East.

And Herod, frightened (read scared to death) by the arrival and the question of the magi.

In the part of the story we read as we began our worship, Joseph is non-existent.

Mary is passive.

Jesus barely mentioned.

There is no arduous journey to Bethlehem while pregnant.

No angels in the sky,

No shepherds in the field.

No Jesus in a manger.

And, while we didn't read it this morning (and don't often read it because we want to keep the Christmas narrative wonderful and beautiful and miraculous), for the sake of this morning and what I found myself thinking about as I read and reread this story, I realized we also need to pay attention to what comes next in Matthew's gospel. When the wisemen don't return to Jerusalem as he instructed them to do, Herod becomes enraged. He sends in his soldiers to slaughter all the children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem while Joseph and Mary and Jesus run for their lives. This, also, is a part of the Christmas story.

Here is the tension.

And, ultimately, the choice Matthew's Gospel presents.

On one side are these strangers from the East who come looking for Jesus. Who, if you remember the earlier part of the story when Joseph is about to dismiss Mary because she is pregnant, an angel appears telling him not to do that and informing him the child, when born, will be called and known as *Immanuel* which means *God with us*. On the other side of this story is Herod who slaughters all the children in a desperate effort to kill that same child, *Immanuel*, in order to maintain his power and control. Got it?

Which leads me to this question: Which star do you see and which star will you follow?

I know the way we often think about this story is that somehow, suddenly this wonderful, mysterious, miraculous star appears in the sky. All sorts of possible explanations have been offered about what that star might have been. Halley's comet. A unique alignment of planets or stars. A new star suddenly appearing and then disappearing. Personally, I love the imagery. But this year I realized maybe none of that is important or what this narrative is really about. And to spend our time talking about how and why and what the possibilities might have been only serves as a distraction to keep us from grappling with what the real point and message of the story.

You see, what I realized in reading and thinking about this story again this year is there were and there are many stars in the sky. Many stars we might see and follow.

Herod saw clearly and was following his star.

His star was power and control maintained by intimidation and brute force.

But, there were and are other stars, as well.

There is the star of *win at all costs*.

Or, the star of *pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps*.

Or, the star of *me first*.

Or, the star of *I deserve this*.

Or, the star of *I can't do that*.

Or, *what if we fail*.

Or, *I am only one person*.

All those stars are there in the sky and the narratives they represent surround us.

They flow through the air we breathe and are in the water we drink.

They are the stories we were told as we grew up.

Which star will you see and which star will you follow?

And then you come to church.

And here, you are reminded...

Here we are reminded...

There is another story.

Another narrative.

Another star in the sky we might see and follow.

This star has something to do with *God with us*.

With each and every one of us.

This star has something to do with treating others as we and they would like to be treated.

This star has something to do with the last being first and a table big enough for all.

This star has something to do with being peacemakers and peace on earth.

This star has something to do with light and grace and welcome and resurrection.

No wonder Herod was afraid.

Those Magi with their question and that star which they saw and chose to follow called into question EVERYTHING he had built his life around.

And because we believe the Bible is not just about then, but also about now.

And not just about them, but also about you and me.

The question which confronted both Herod and the Magi is now asked of you and me.

Which star will you see and which star do you follow?

Let me end with this.

What I often say when I finish reading a portion of scripture on Sunday mornings.

May the same Spirit which inspired the Gospel writer to record these words help interpret their meaning for our lives this day.