

Gathering Light
Matthew 2:1-12
January 7, 2018
Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC
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1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They 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.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

One of my favorite authors and spiritual mentors is the late Madeleine L'Engle. You may know her for her fiction, *A Wrinkle in Time*, being her best known work. She also wrote poetry, personal memoir, books of spiritual and theological reflections on art, scripture and seasons of the church year. I turn to her writing when I need hope. In her book of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany writings, Madeleine shares a very early childhood memory. Her family was visiting her grandmother's house on an almost uninhabited beach in North Florida. Born in 1918 this night time experience took place well before the days of light pollution. She writes:

"It must have been an unusually clear and beautiful night for someone to have said, 'Let's wake the baby and show her the stars.' The night sky, the constant rolling of breakers against the shore, the stupendous light of the stars – all made an indelible impression on me. I was intuitively aware not only of a beauty I had never seen before but also that the

world was far greater than the protected limits of the small child's world which was all that I had known thus far. I had a total, if not very conscious, moment of revelation; I saw creation bursting the bounds of daily restriction and stretching out from dimension to dimension, beyond any human comprehension. This early experience was freeing, rather than daunting, and since it was the first, it has been the foundation for all other such glimpses of glory."¹

I wonder if the magi who followed the star to Bethlehem experienced a night like this night in Madeleine's life. The brilliance of the stars overhead, the radiance of the new star they followed out shining all the others, the sound of breakers on a beach, or perhaps, wind whistling across desert sands and rattling the dry leaves of palm trees. Surely they did, even though I also imagine their journey was long and tedious at times, even dangerous.

Matthew writes that the revelation of this new star in the east, a first glimpse of glory, set them on their pilgrimage. What other revelations might they have had along the way? Small glimpses of glory in their daily travel experiences? What bits of heart light and intellectual insight did they gather as they traveled that illuminated their journey? I imagine that they each had a fine collection, bits and bobs of glory glimpses, when they finally they reached the place where the star stopped over the house that held the One they sought, the new king, the Light of the world.

The season of Epiphany which we entered yesterday on the twelfth day of Christmas is a season of light, a season of the revelation of God's glory, particularly in Jesus the Christ. One of its primary images is the shining star that led the magi. The scriptures we will encounter as we journey through this time of year leading us to Lent will all hold images of brightness, of stars, of new days dawning, of miracles, of the deep mystery of God with us in human form. Epiphany is a time of gathering light and glimpses of God's glory even in the darkest hours.

I know that we preachers talk a lot about light in the darkness. About trusting in God to guide, about the need to keep on keeping on. Maybe to the point of our listeners' exhaustion. And ours. We talk about such things to keep our hope alive along with yours.

We live in exhausting times. We long to figure out solutions to the problems of the world. To make ways for peace and justice. To be the change we long to see. Epiphany is a time to gather light for our journeys of justice, to gather hope in the stories of mystery and miracle that will sustain our ministries here at Plymouth and our personal pilgrimage through the year. It is a time to tend the stars that guide us like the star cleaners, to listen to their music, to receive their tears of joy. And all so that we can hold them in our hearts.

In a poem titled, "Into the darkest hour," Madeleine L'Engle wrote:
It was a time like this,
War & tumult of war,

a horror in the air.
Hunger yawned the abyss –
and yet there came the star
and the child most wonderfully there.

It was a time like this
of fear & lust for power,
license & greed and blight _
and yet the [One] of bliss
came into the darkest hour
in quiet & silent light.

And in a time like this
how celebrate his birth
when all things fall apart?
Ah! wonderful it is
with no room on the earth
the stable is our heart.ⁱⁱ

When we open our hearts like the stable doors and once again they are filled with the light of Christ what then? I think you know. It is our privilege and responsibility to show up in the dark places of the world and let the stars of God's love shine.

We let God's love shine in the dark places of our own hearts and souls and minds. This is important and sometimes hard work. It takes prayer, study, a community of faith for support....sometimes even therapy or counseling. Its all worth it because we cannot share what we do not have. Its all worth it because each of us deserves to know in our heart of hearts that we are beloved beings made in the image of the Holy One.

We let God's love shine in the dark places of our communities, family, work, school, through the outreach, calling and caring, Christian formation ministries of Plymouth. We show up here to care for one another and to let that care spill over into the world, through working for justice for the homeless, for the immigrant and refugee. We show up here for the sustenance of study and prayer and fellowship with one another. So that we may more effectively work for the sustenance of Plymouth, this beloved community, and its ministries, to work for peace in the world.

We let God's love shine in the dark places when we gather to worship God each week. To give ourselves up wholeheartedly to God's presence in community as we sing and pray and listen to God's word in scripture and sermon. Our mission here at Plymouth is first and foremost to worship God SO THAT we may shine like the stars with the light of Christ. SO THAT we may experience glimpses of God's glory in one another and wherever we else we may be.

On his much beloved 1980's science show, "Cosmos," the late astrophysicist and cosmologist, Carl Sagan made famous the notion that we

human beings, as well as most of the matter on Earth, are literally made of the stuff of stars, of star dust. Sagan said, "We are a way for the universe to know itself. Some part of our being knows this is where we came from. We long to return. And we can, because the cosmos is also within us. We're made of star stuff."ⁱⁱⁱ Sagan's statement sums up the fact that the carbon, nitrogen and oxygen atoms in our bodies, as well as atoms of all other heavy elements, were created in previous generations of stars over 4.5 billion years ago. Scientifically, we are made of star stuff.

And in the mystery of theological and spiritual metaphor/truth, we are made of star stuff....made of the light of God. We hold that light within our hearts, hold the One born in the light of the stable within our very being, the One born to be God with us. How can we not share the glimpses of glory, the light we gather along the way?

I leave you an invitation to this season of gathering light through the power of Madeleine L'Engle's poem, "Epiphany":

"Unclench your fists
Hold out your hands.
Take mine.
Let us hold each other.
Thus is God's Glory Manifest."^{iv}
Amen.

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ⁱ "The Light of the Stars," Miracle on 10th Street and other Christmas Writings, Madeleine L'Engle, (Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL: 1998, 39-40).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.livescience.com/32828-humans-really-made-stars.html>

^{iv} L'Engle, 49.