

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Ephesians 3: 1-12
Matthew 2: 1-12

Ominous Starlight
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Mary R. Brownlow

“We three kings from orient are” – one of the many Christmas hymns that takes some liberties with the few details we find in one of the Bible stories about the birth of Jesus. As you have just heard, Matthew tells us that an unspecified number of wise men – or magi, or sages – arrived in Jerusalem sometime after the child’s birth. The reason the church decided to call them *kings* was based on the Isaiah passage, which includes, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Of course, Isaiah was talking about the city of Jerusalem, not a baby, but...never mind. The reason the church decided that there were *three* kings was based on the fact that there were three gifts. So it could have been 2 kings or 20, but...never mind. It all fits in so neatly with our paintings and our decorations and our Christmas carols.

And we love our Christmas stars, too, don’t we? We put them on the top of trees, we cut them out of paper, we search for historical astronomical explanations for a convergence of planets that would explain the unusual sight. Never mind that a star does not stop over a geographical spot like Bethlehem, nor does it normally have arrows coming out of it saying, “Right here! It’s this house!” But here is something else we often miss in Mathew’s narrative. The wise men have seen an unusual star that impels them to make a long journey. Herod sees an unusual star and is frightened: something ominous is hanging up there. And, it says, “all Jerusalem” agrees with him. For the people of Jerusalem, that star is bad news, not a beautiful and inspiring sight.

For most of human history that’s how people thought about unusual astronomical events. The ancient historian Josephus says that a star stood over the city of Jerusalem just before its fall in the year 70. Some people thought that the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE had been caused by a comet. And we know from the Bayeux tapestry that the appearance of a star or comet in the sky over England in 1066, just before the Norman Conquest was seen as a dark omen of what was to come for the Saxons. And in 1835, some people apparently even blamed a star for the fall of the Alamo.

So when we read that Herod was frightened, "and all Jerusalem with him," it makes complete sense. When the heavens themselves begin to defy prediction, just as when the climate begins an alarming shift, there is no telling what might happen. What other systems and constellations might shift or appear or disappear? We expect things to go on in predictable patterns, so what other systems of power, what other constellations of privilege, what other pattern of behavior might collapse, and leave us either broken or better off? It turns out that starlight, beautiful starlight, is more complicated than we thought.

I am rather glad that the Magi were not kings, because we can see more clearly how kings with predictable but ruthless power respond to unusual light. The Magi probably belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, based in Persia, which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science. Here is another shocking piece of the story then: some of the first people to

recognize this birth as an incarnation of the divine were foreign scientists who practiced another religion. Somehow their faith and knowledge brought them to visit and honor Jesus. One gets the sense that they were already faithful, devout men, open to spiritual questions, searching for more light, willing to ask questions...in other words, they were already role models for us. And God spoke to them directly, through dreams, no interpreter needed. How ironic that these foreigners were the ones to let the king and all his experts know that the Messiah had been born! We never find out how or whether their lives were changed by meeting that little baby. Certainly they never became "Christians" in any sense of the word. If they symbolize an epiphany, light reaching out to all the nations, then the encounter was on a mystical level, and not about conversion at all.

It seems that God is willing to use whomever it takes, whatever it takes to reach out and embrace all people.

All this makes me ask, who are the Wise Men and Women who are being led to the light, in spite of all dire predictions to the contrary, in spite of all the danger and uncertainty we face in the world?

I'll tell you about a few. In 2010, the Muslim community in Cordova, Tennessee was in the middle of constructing a place of worship. The spot they chose was on a stretch of road called "church row" because there were 5 Christian churches in close proximity. Pastor Steve Stone of Heartsong Church saw this ominous development and had a predictable reaction. "When I saw (it), my stomach kind of tightened up. ... I felt that ignorance and that fear," he said. And he was not alone. Dr. Bashar Shala of the Memphis Islamic Center "It is a difficult time for Muslims in America," he said. "We did not expect to be welcomed." But Steve Stone must have had some kind of epiphany, because he spoke with some of his church leaders and put up a sign outside his church: "Heartsong Church Welcomes Islamic Center to the neighborhood." This step led the leaders of the Islamic community to ask whether they could use a small space at the church for Ramadan prayers that year, since their own space was not ready. Heartsong agreed to host them for the entire month. It was a shining light of tolerance and cooperation. When it made the news on CNN, it was seen by a group of Muslims in Kashmir. They called Steve Stone on the phone and told him that after seeing the segment, one of their community's leaders said, "God just spoke to us through this man." And another went out to the local Christian church to clean it, inside and out, because he wanted to be a good neighbor too. They told Stone, "we're going to keep taking care of this little church for the rest of our lives."

But cooperation did not stop after CNN left or after construction of the Islamic Center in Cordova was completed. Since then, the church and mosque have kept on cooperating. Once a month, they get together to help the homeless in their neighborhood, and there are also plans to build a new park that would sit on both congregations' property. They support those in need by doing coat and food drives together. In honor of 9/11 every year, they have done a blood drive and shared their facilities. They've even combined their Thanksgiving dinners into one giant celebration. In the spring, they throw an amazing picnic to gather the entire community.

I might think of all this as a shining light, a beacon of hope in our world. But some people got that ominous star feeling out of it. Some members of Heartsong Church were just not comfortable. We can understand this. Mark Sharpe, a member of the church, said, "Me and my wife both were thinking about leaving church because I just did not accept what was going on."

So Sharpe looked to Stone, his pastor, and asked him what he should do. The reply? Just read the gospels. Which Sharpe did. And they helped him reach a pretty emotional realization about the situation. "I figured out I was the problem," Sharpe said. "What was going on with the world today, I was the problem." I guess they found a way to stay and be part of the epiphany party.

One could choose otherwise, of course. One could join Herod and "all Jerusalem" in giving way to fear, or feeling threatened by starlight, or just not seeing the expanse of God's embrace. One could choose a path of violence, as Herod and his soldiers did, or apathy, as many other did, or just plain hunker down with our own territorial needs and concerns.

I want to hear about your epiphanies. I want to know particular stories about the ways God enters the world. I want to see how our actions are inspired by, or judged by, what we find in our sacred Scriptures. And then I want to use larger strokes on a larger canvas. What connects my epiphany and my sense of Emmanuel – God is with us – to yours. Can I learn, through your story, or through other stories, how I may have missed the power and beauty of the starlight?

As we gather around the table of communion today, let us savor the story of the wise men's epiphany: and the fullness, the challenge and grace of our tradition. Then we can use it to fuel generous and vibrant living, shining the starlight of God into our souls, onto our lives, throughout the world. Amen.