

January 9th, 2022
Rev. Dr. Camille Cook Howe
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12
Stargazing

Matthew calls them ‘wise men’ from the East. Not necessarily kings as the beloved Christmas hymn depicts them. We don’t know exactly who they are, but we know a group of people from outside of Israel experienced a significant celestial occurrence and knew they needed to investigate. They did not know how to read the scriptures, but they did know how to read the stars. And the night Jesus was born, a spectacular astrological event took place.

In the ancient world, stars and other signs in the heavens were thought to signal important events. In this case, a bright star rising leads them to think a royal birth has occurred in Judea. Impressive that they could figure that out. When they came to this conclusion they were not satisfied with the knowledge of the birth, they wanted to go and see for themselves. It was a good first stop to visit Herod, assuming the king would know what was going on in his territory. “Where is this child who has been born king of the Jews?” They wanted to meet this child and present their gifts and pay their respect. They were asking the wrong guy – Herod the suspicious, Herod the insecure, Herod the weak. He did know about the royal birth and news of it made incredibly uncomfortable.

Maybe the star shone so brightly for Jesus because there was just so much darkness all around. We call the day epiphany because the star rose and led these stargazers to get up and seek out the cause of that star. What was it that brought into the world?

On Monday, I was settling in for a beautiful snowy day at home. The Christmas break for the kids had already been loooooong so what was another day or two? We would sled and drink hot chocolate and enjoy the disruption to our plans of getting to school and work and routines. But the disruption did not go as I expected. A few hours into the morning, I was sitting at my computer catching up on the backlog of emails when a huge noise rattled the house and a large spark lit up the windows at the front. It sounded like an explosion. Immediately all the lights and the heat and internet shut off. We went to the front of the house to see the broken power lines and the fallen trees and transformers which would take many hours to repair. This day was not going to go quite as I had expected. We had to stop what were we doing and make new plans for the day. Sort of like epiphany perhaps. They experienced something so significant and disruptive that these wisemen had to stop what they were doing and go to investigate.

The event of Jesus’ birth was incredibly disruptive to the world. The poor shepherds had to go and see what was happening. The wisemen had to leave their homes and travel long and far to explore. This was an astrological, cosmological, theological event for the history books. The light exploded into the darkness and life would never be the same. God made this event so significant that wisemen and women would change the course of their lives because of it. They heard the call and saw the signs and went to follow Jesus.

Christmas should be incredibly disruptive. It should be the light and the crash that gets us out of our chairs and tells us that things are going to be different than we planned. Jesus was the epiphany. He was the bright light that came to shine in the darkness. We must be willing to

follow the light and embrace the disruption to find the joy. The light led them to Jesus and Jesus led them to joy.

This Christmas Eve, we were scrambling to figure out how to handle our service. Cancel the pageant? Go virtual? Cut out the singing? Do you light candles to Silent Night then lower your masks to extinguish them and spread germs all over the place? We did our best with fewer kids, different participants, and soloists to lead the music. I was grumpy about it. We were just picking up momentum in Advent, starting to feel the energy of the church being together and then Omicron came to disrupt us yet again. As the service went on and I watched the kids in their masks doing their very best to speak their lines, I was proud of them for being there. I was proud of them for wanting to help tell the story even though it would have been incredibly easy to skip over and just say we will try again next year. At the end of the service, we decided we would listen to Silent Night while our candles were lit and then we would walk outside and sing Joy to the World acapella. It was there, outside, on the porch, with candles lit, and people gathered closer together, the kids proudly wearing their costumes, that I finally felt Christmas. Maybe it was the candles shining in the darkness, maybe it was being able to look at people in the eyes, maybe it was singing that beloved verse about Joy coming to the world. I don't really know but it felt like my epiphany. Christmas had come. Joy had come. Light still shined in the darkness. The light led us to Jesus and Jesus was the joy of the world.

December 21st is the longest night, the night of the most darkness. Each day after we gain a few more minutes of daylight each day. It is hard to notice it, just those few more minutes adding each day, but the light is growing. My daughter came home on Wednesday and said, "Mom, guess what we are going to be learning about in school tomorrow?" I took a deep breath, assuming she meant that the school would be discussing the attack on the Capitol building last year on January 6th. How do you explain such a thing to an eight-year-old? How would they handle it? What does she already know about it? Would she be scared? But then she interrupted my thought process and excitedly reported that at school on Thursday they would be learning about Epiphany!! On January 6th, 2022, she would be learning about the star that shone so brightly that it led the wisemen to Jesus. That alone felt like a miracle. Alleluia, praise the Lord!

It is really hard to talk about the light, to teach about the light, to even see the light when there is deep darkness in the world. It is easier and sometimes more comfortable to talk about the darkness. Yet it is the call of the Christian to tell the good news. If the Christian doesn't tell it then it will not be told. The call at the beginning of the new year is to be stargazers – looking for signs and evidence of God at work.

If we are to see the light, we will have to lift our eyes and look around. Don't look down at your feet, at your phone, at your newspaper. Look up. It may take you some time to retrain your eyes to see it if you have been groping around in the darkness for a long time. We have grown accustomed to the darkness. Our eyes prefer it. The light however is good for us. The light heals, the light nourishes, the light enables growth. God is the light. And God can disperse the darkness and reveal a new reality where faith, hope, and love are alive and well.

On the radio station that I listened to occasionally there is a morning tradition called ‘Tell me something good.’ Each of the DJs must find a piece of good news to share, a story of a reunion, a story of a good deed, a story of generosity. It is a discipline for them because they must present it to thousands of people on the radio, but I bet this task changes their vision. They are on the lookout for epiphanies – the times when light breaks into the darkness. What if every day you had to present to a piece of good news to your entire family, or your school, or your law firm, or your company? You would start looking around, actively searching for the good that is breaking into the world. You would become a stargazer, actively looking, and listening and waiting for the good news. And your eyes and your mind and your heart would retrain.

I’m going to try it.

The prophet Isaiah says, “For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” If it seems to you like there is darkness covering the earth or darkness in your life, then you must try it too. You must become a stargazer – looking for signs of God’s light. You must start looking up and anticipating new things. The Lord will arise upon you. The light will come – even if slowly, just a minute at a time.

Heads up. Arise, shine; for your light has come. Amen.