

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Look to the Stars

Psalm 19:1, Matthew 2:1-11

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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As I began doing my reading to work on my sermon for today, I found myself awash in differences of opinions about just who the magi were. Who were these people and from where did they come? Some scholars said they were scientists who studied the stars. Some said they were nomads from the East who were into fortune telling and magic. The words *magi* and *magic* have the same etymology. Some said they were Zoroastrian priests from Persia who studied the stars to learn of the births of new prophets. Everyone I read agreed they weren't kings; there weren't three of them and that perhaps included in this band of wandering travelers were some women.

Just who these magi were, is significant to the story. If they were scientists, then I can make the point that religion and science are not incompatible. That would be a nice story, especially in a time of pandemic and climate change. If they were foreign nomads who were into magic and fortune telling we could talk about how God is revealed to all of humankind inside and outside of the church. If they were Persian priests who believed in the coming of a new king of the Jews, then we can talk about interfaith connections.

All of those possibilities were juicy and enticing for me. But what struck me in all my reading was what was rarely mentioned. The star...it played only a bit part. That is true today. Most of us know so little about the night sky. We are focused on what we can see and touch. We often fail to notice the natural world as we go about our daily lives. Throughout Advent this year we have been focusing on the beginning of creation, the amazement of light and the wonder of the universe.

The overall theme for our Advent sermon series this year is "Radical Amazement" based on the words of Jewish theologian and philosopher, Abraham Heschel, who said that "awareness of the divine begins with wonder. Living in radical amazement brings us into the space in which great things happen to the soul." In a time when we are focused on the current safety protocols needed to save our lives it is hard to remember to stand back with radical amazement and notice this universe we call home.

Several years ago, I went glamping with a good friend I have had since high school. If you don't know, glamping is glamorous camping. We were in the High Sierras camping but someone else cooked gourmet meals for us and our days were spent hiking. At night, away from people and light pollution the night sky was brilliant with stars and I couldn't fail to notice the wonder of creation. My friend had done some reading before we went on how we could see better in the dark. We sat outside at night allowing the rods and cones in our eyes to adjust to the dark for 45 minutes and then using our peripheral vision the night sky astounded us.

Living in the city we so seldom get the chance to be overwhelmed with the brightness and vastness of the stars. I want you to imagine that each grain of sand in this thimble represents a star. In the High Sierras on a clear night, with no light pollution and eyes that were adjusted to the dark, my friend and I would have been able to see two to three thousand stars.

That is a lot of stars but let's put that into perspective. The Milky Way, which is our galaxy in which, you could say, we live in the suburbs, is between one hundred thousand light years across and ten thousand light years deep. In our galaxy there are between two hundred and four hundred billion stars. To represent all the stars in the Milky Way with grains of sand we would need a large dump truck of sand.

But we now know that there are billions of galaxies in the universe, each with billions of stars. How many grains of sand do you think it would take to equal the stars in our known universe? Imagine railroad cars, filled with sand, passing by at the rate of one per second, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It would take three years for all the sand-filled cars to pass by to equal the number of stars in our universe!

Plus, we also know now that the universe is expanding. Approximately 70 percent of the universe is dark energy – which is the force that is causing the rate of the expansion of the universe to accelerate. About five percent of the universe is composed of ordinary matter – which is what we can observe directly in some way. So, that means that we can't see 95 percent of the universe in which we live.

Celtic Christianity teaches that we must read from the two books of God – the big book and the little book. The big book is the universe with everything in the natural world in it – everything that has been spoken into being. In the beginning was the Word...the very utterance of God. The little book is our scripture...our Bible. John Phillip Newell, a poet and author in the field of Celtic spirituality, says that if we listen only to the little book and ignore the big book of creation, we will miss God spoken and present in all things. If we listen only to the big book or the expression of God in the universe and ignore the little book or God's word in scripture, we will miss the intimacy of God speaking in the secret places of the human heart.

This story of the magi tells of travelers who made a journey using the big book and the little book. The magi looked to the stars which led them to Jerusalem, where they stopped at the palace assuming that the new King of the Jews would be found there. King Herod was frightened by these strangers and their news and called together the chief priests and the scribes to see if they had any idea where a "new" king might be found. These scholars consulted scripture or the little book to point these readers of the big book to the little town of Bethlehem...nine miles away. In Bethlehem the star shone down on a home that housed the messiah. By looking to the night sky and the Hebrew scriptures, the magi were led to a king born into a humble home – they were led to the place where the ordinary became holy and the holy became ordinary. They were so moved by what they witnessed in that meek place that they knelt down and worshipped.

Tomorrow, December 21 is the winter solstice...also called midwinter. It is when the north pole has its maximum tilt away from the sun. At the pole it will be night or twilight for 24 hours. For us, it will be the shortest day and the longest night. Something rare will happen this year on the winter solstice.

From our point of view here on Earth Jupiter and Saturn will look very close to each other and actually appear like a double planet. This phenomenon hasn't happened for 800 years. It is called the "Christmas Star."

I heard an astronomer conjecture one time about the star over Bethlehem. He talked about the possibilities of what the magi might have seen. I don't remember all of the possibilities, but I remember that he talked about the possible conjunction of three planets – Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. He talked about Haley's comet. It was interesting but again I think that the idea that when we try to figure out who the magi were and what they might have seen in the night sky we try to make the Bible a history book and we miss what the biblical writer wanted us to truly see. We miss the intimacy of God speaking in the secret places of the heart. We forget to step back in radical amazement and see the incarnation happening around us. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante describes God as "the love that moves the stars." Don't miss the big book showing us the presence of God in all things.

Thomas Long says that "the world is full of 'stars in the East'--events in nature, personal experience, and history that point toward the mystery of God". The story from Matthew 2 of people on a journey to find the incarnation is not just a story that happened once a long time ago. It happens all the time. It is a story that calls for a response from us. Led by light, mystery, hope, the wisdom of others, the scripture itself, and the night sky travelers have witnessed the presence of God over and over throughout the centuries.

The magi followed a star at its rising and the journey led them to find Immanuel – God with us – the light at the heart of all life. This is a story about the Light at the heart of everything. The light that is the love that moves the stars. The light at the very heart of you....of me. And once we have witnessed this light that the darkness cannot overcome, it rises within us. Our only choice is to let that star rise within us...to take it back home with us.

In all the richness of this story don't miss that central nugget of light. Open your eyes to the light of God's love that leads us....that invites us to see the love of God proclaimed by this holy, holy world where the ordinary becomes holy and the holy becomes ordinary. Amen.