

“When the Eyes of the World Are Watching”
Based on Matthew 2:1-12
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There’s a new star in the sky. Somewhere in what’s now Iran or Iraq—somewhere east of Palestine, some men trained in watching the skies, trained as astronomers, they notice this new star. Over there in the East they have a whole science of watching the stars, a science the citizens of Palestine didn’t yet understand. In Persia, they believe that if they watch the stars carefully enough, they can learn the secrets of the universe, the mysteries of life. So they know enough about the stars to read this new one as a sign from God, a sign about a new leader arising from and for the Jews, a leader of importance for the whole world as they know it. They are wise, these men, when it comes to the stars.

I think it was Oscar Wilde who defended his own wild life by saying, Hey, we are all in the gutter—we are all a species of animal, with physical needs and base desires—we are all in the gutter, he said, but some of us are looking at the stars. The wise men in Matthew are definitely looking at the stars, but they may have forgotten that they are standing with the rest of us in the gutter. They’re wise about the stars, but not so wise about other things. These astronomers or astrologers might be wise about the rotation of the planets and even the location of the birth of the new king of the Jews, but they are—you’d have to say stupid even, about the powers that be. They go to Herod thinking Herod a) knows how to read the stars or the scriptures and b) that Herod is going to celebrate with them the birth of the king of the Jews. Herod **is** the King of the Jews! So the idea that Herod will go and worship his own replacement, seems awfully naïve if not downright foolish.

So we’re impressed by their knowledge of the stars, by their devotion and persistence—they come all this way, they navigate their way here by means of that one remarkable star, and all just to bring the new king their best gifts. Not only are they good astronomers and good honorary Jews, they are also very humble—to come and kneel at the feet of this ordinary-looking baby, to bring him valuable presents. So we admire them for all of that, but then there’s the other part of the story. The naivete of these men, their foolishness in sounding off Herod’s alarms about a king being born—as Bruce Cockburn says, they come pretty close to wrecking everything. The story almost ends right here, with the baby Jesus dead at the hands of Herod’s goons. Ok, with the help of several dreams, God manages to save Jesus from the slaughter—but other babies are killed! Those innocents pay with their lives for the ongoing life of Jesus, just as he will later pay with his life on the cross for the lives of us all. Maybe if the wise men had been a little more down to earth, a little less focused on the stars, they could have found someone to direct them to Bethlehem, without alerting Herod. They could have brought their gifts without leaving destruction behind them.

Then again, destiny, or divine providence, is a strange and complicated thing. Often in the gospels and in the Bible in general, God gets something done with a combination of people and events. Rather than just sending one person to do the job and get it done, God

relies on one person going out, meeting resistance, responding to the resistance, and so on and that's how the job gets done. The wise men know enough to track the star to Palestine. Then they need Herod's help—or they think they do. They don't trust the star to take them to the actual birthplace of the king. Herod summons his priests and scribes and they examine the scriptures and inform Herod, who informs the wise men—from here, make a right turn toward Bethlehem. The wise men can read the sky, but they don't know the scriptures. Herod—or people around Herod—have the scriptures, but they didn't notice the big bright sign in the sky telling them to open them up and read. The wise men have good intentions, but not a lot of worldly understanding or grounding in the tradition—they don't know how things work around here. Herod and his court know exactly how things work, but they have only the worst intentions. This is going to be the story of Jesus' life, and says something about the ongoing life of the gospel in the world.

There are people with good intentions, and then there are people who know how to get things done. When those two groups meet, both good and bad consequences explode outward from the meeting. The meeting of Herod and the wise men means that the baby Jesus is worshipped, given gifts that honor him more than his parents would ever have expected, his place in the known world is declared by the gifts of gold and spices. But the same meeting of Herod and the wise men means that many children are killed, and the baby Jesus barely escapes with his life. If only the wise men had understood how things worked around here. If only Herod had an ounce of good faith.

With the coming of the wise men, the entire universe is being told about the birth of Jesus. The world was not very big, after all, when Matthew wrote his gospel. There were no Americas as far as Matthew knew, no Australia, and only the northern edge of Africa. China and India would have been a vague rumor that most disbelieved. For men from as far away as Persia to follow this star into little Judea, all the way to some house in Bethlehem—that was as if the leaders from all countries of the world were to suddenly appear in our church on Sunday, having heard about the great things that are happening here. These few wise men represent for Matthew's gospel the whole known world, outside of Israel itself. So for Matthew the coming of these men means that everyone knows that Jesus is born, and everyone knows what a huge, important, and entirely good thing that birth is. Everyone but Herod, that is. Everyone but the rulers of his own homeland, the people with education enough to read the scripture.

The story of the Magi in the gospel of Matthew begs us—put all the elements of faith together. Look at the sky, like the wise men, watch your own world for the signs from God, read the universe, look at the stars. But at the same time, be aware of where you are, while you're looking at the stars, be aware that your feet are in the gutter with the rest of humanity. We are not the first people ever to watch for the messiah, to look for God's work in the world. Unlike the wise men, we need to be aware that there is this tradition, there are these writings, there is a well-worn, if difficult path laid out that goes right to Jesus' door. Without that heavenly inspiration, the path is meaningless—no one would walk it. But having the inspiration and not the path will get you lost, or hurt, or hurt others along the way.

Right now, as in Matthew's time and in Jesus' time before that, there is a whole group of people that stand outside our tradition, looking at the stars and noticing things that we often don't. And then there's this whole group of people in churches like this one around the world who know how to read the Bible—more or less—but have forgotten why they should. That first group of people can get a certain distance along the road to God, but then they're going to lose their way. Without any structure, without any guidance handed down from the people who've walked this path over the millennia, those inspired new age spiritual seekers are going to get good and lost, or, like the wise men initially, they're going to go to entirely the wrong place, and ask directions from entirely the wrong person. Our job is to be what the wise men expect Herod to be—a good and faithful keeper of the tradition, a resource and a guide, who wants only to lead the faithful to Jesus. That means we also need to be reading the stars, reading the signs in our world. We need to know what our community needs and they need to know that we are here, they can ask us for directions—we have some resources to offer the well-meaning traveler, looking for God.

The expression is Wise Men still seek him. And wise women too, of course. Yes, wise men still seek him. But who is going to tell them where to look? Wise men still seek him. We need to be those wise men, seeking, looking, open to what the world around us has to say. And we need to be the guides for the starry-eyed wise men who appear at our doorstep, or who wander by on the street—we need to provide the roadmaps found in scripture for those among the unchurched who are wise enough to begin looking. In the search for Jesus, we have to hold onto enough of the questions to keep us motivated and moving, and enough of the answers to keep us moving in the right direction.