

# STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

Matthew 2:1-12

Sunday, January 6, 2008 — Epiphany

Rev. James Campbell

One summer evening, long, long ago, I stood with my grandmother out in her backyard. Twilight had descended and the first faint twinkle of the North Star could be seen. She pointed it out to me and then taught me the following: “Star light, star bright, first star I’ve seen tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.” And then she told me that I should always watch for the first star of the evening and make a wish every time because some of those wishes would come true.

It used to be easier to see the first star of the evening. Recently I read an article in the New Yorker about light pollution and how it prevents us from seeing the night sky that all of our ancestors had always seen. It stated, rather sadly, that most of us have never really seen the full glory of the heavens, even when we’re in the country. There is just too much artificial light. But American ingenuity being what it is, star light tour companies have sprung up and will take you out into the desert of Arizona for an overnight expedition. You pay a fee just to see those heavenly jewels that were once free to gaze upon.

At this time of year, our attention turns to the stars, but not just any star. There is one star in particular that captures our imagination. It is so ensconced in our collective Christmas consciousness that we cannot think of Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus without also thinking of those mysterious Wise Men from the East who

traveled a great distance to find the Christ Child, led only by a brilliant Star and their astrological calculations.

Scholars debate what it is they actually saw. Was it an alignment of the planets?

Was it a comet? Some people doubt the veracity of the whole tale, noting that in the folklore of many ancient cultures, a star heralded the birth of a great person or a god.

Perhaps, they say, St. Matthew used this common belief as a literary device in order to signal his readers that the birth of Jesus was something truly extraordinary.

Whatever. I'm not as interested in the Star as I am in the Starry-Eyed Dreamers who went looking for Jesus. Maybe they have something to say to us modern folk, so often blinded by artificial light.

So, who were they, these Magi? That too is up for debate, but one thing is clear: just like so many other heroes of the Bible, they were outsiders, unlikely heroes. Scholars say that they were magicians, astronomers, astrologers, pseudo-scientists, fortune-tellers, horoscope fanatics. By any decent religious standard, they were heretics: wrong race, wrong religion. Perhaps it was those obstacles that made them so tenacious. The truth was so important to them that they left their home country and made a difficult journey. They could have stayed in their very comfortable lives, being, as they were, members of the upper classes. But the Star would simply not leave them alone.

Along the way, they encountered plenty of opposition. Riding a camel across the desert is only fun in the movies. After their grueling journey, they arrived in

Jerusalem and encountered Herod, a despicable man known for his cruelty: murdering his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and many others. After the Wise Men visited him, he ordered the murder of all the baby boys under the age of 2 who lived in Bethlehem. He was terrified of the very Truth the Magi were seeking. Herod is long since dead, but his spirit is still very much alive in the powerful who are forever subverting the truth. Their priority is the status quo, and Star-Gazers, Truth seekers only get in their way. Violence is often the result.

Finally, despite the hardships of the journey and the political danger, the Magi arrived at the place where the Star had stopped, the place where the child was. St. Matthew hits the nail on the head when he identifies that moment of joy, when after struggle and darkness, we find the truth and we know it. He writes: “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” Overwhelmed with joy – is there any truer indication of the discovery of truth than the resounding joy that overwhelms us when we understand; we get it; we have an Epiphany. And upon entering the house, they saw Mary and the child. And they bowed down, presented their treasures and worshipped.

These Magi, with their curiosity and boundary pushing, are heroes of the Gospel. But why, then, are the Star-Gazers of the world so often at odds with politics and society and religion? Why are those who push at the boundaries of convention so often cast as the villains? Why does the church seem so often at odds with the very kind of folk the Bible is forever celebrating: people like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, the host of prophets, the followers of Jesus, even Jesus Christ himself –

star-gazers all, people who struck out on a journey convinced that God would lead them to the Truth. And more often than not, the powers that be were threatened and angry and violent when the curious assumed that there might be more light and truth out there.

Star Gazers: that's a pretty apt description of many of us. Here we are, in church, when conventional wisdom says we're not church folk. We're not willing to sign on the dotted line of conformity. We like the adventure. But this kind of faith journey is not without its risks. Some of us have paid a price for insisting on searching for the truth. The baby sleeping in his mother's arms would one day hang on a cross. But for star gazers, the promise of truth is simply too alluring to ignore.

So here's my advice for us all in this year of our Lord, 2008: Stay on your camel. Ride across any desert. Confront any tyrant. But keep looking. Keep longing. Keep dreaming because the Truth is out there. And the One whose birth was heralded by a Star said that the Truth would set us free.

**"Star light, star bright, first star we've seen tonight. I wish we may, I wish we might, find the truth we seek tonight." Amen.**