Light Shines…on the least expected

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Matthew 2:1-2

Buckingham Church

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(Sung) “We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar. Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star. (Invite all to sing) “O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

Okay, I know I seem to be jumping ahead in the story a bit, since we usually don’t say much about the magi until January 6, Epiphany, which celebrates the star stopping over Bethlehem and guiding them to Jesus. But if you think about it, those magi, astrologers, scholars, whatever they were (but probably not Kings), had to have started that journey well before January 6. Legends say they came from Persia (think Iran) and possibly sub-Saharan Africa. In a time before planes, trains and automobiles, a journey of that length would have taken months, not weeks. The star appeared before Jesus did, long before. Long before Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, long before the angels spoke to the shepherds in their fields, perhaps even before Gabriel came to Mary, those magi had mounted their camels and set out on a journey to do, what exactly?

They weren’t sure. They interpreted the signs in the stars as meaning that a great leader, a great hope for the world, was about to be born somewhere, a leader so significant that they wanted to travel to meet that leader. Being scientists and philosophers, not politicians, they weren’t on a diplomatic mission. Rather they felt that a profound shift would be taking place on the earth, and they wanted to be part of it. Being Zoroastrians or animists or some other faith but not Jewish, they were not seeking Messiah. The light that shone down on them seemed a message that transcended local tradition, religion, or politics.

If you think about it, Matthew is implying that the first followers of Jesus were what Jesus’ people would have thought of as foreigners, Gentiles, outsiders, heretics, pagans, and perhaps some other more derogatory terms. How surprised those Magi must have been to discover at the end of their journey a small Jewish boy-child born to a poor family. How surprised Mary and Joseph must have been when these strangers showed up! How God must have laughed with delight.

Human beings everywhere excel at coming up with unwelcoming names for and lies about those perceived to be outsiders. Jesus was so far beyond all that, at his birth and in his whole life. He healed Romans and Greeks as well as Jews. He spoke to women from Samaria and Caesarea as well as Israel. He hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors, hicks from Galilee and sophisticated folks from Jerusalem, Jews and Gentiles. How wonderful! Sadly, that is a message the church has too often corrupted, ignored, or downright repudiated, and certainly not celebrated enough!

Did you know that the largest churches in the world in the first 1000 years of Christianity were in places like Syria, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine? I saw the ruins of a great cathedral in a small town in eastern Turkey called Salah which had been destroyed in the 1300’s by the invader Timur (Tamerlane). Did you know that before any Christian set foot in the Western hemisphere, sizable communities of Christians worshiped and worked in those places, as well as China, India, northern Africa, and Russia? We have become so used to thinking of the Christian faith as a Western religion that we have forgotten our own history. As though the journey of the magi there and back again had never occurred.

One of the greatest hopes for Christianity as a light in the shadows to many people was that from the very beginning, this was not a localized faith. This was not a faith limited to one ethnic group or race or geographical region. This was not a faith where only one gender could have full membership. This was not a faith reserved for only the wealthy or the free. As the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch reminds us, it was not a faith reserved for only one gender identity. As the apostle Paul would later say, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free, for all are one. Again, how wonderful!

We are once again living in a time when people around the world, Christians, and those of other faiths in equal numbers, are working very hard at dividing human beings from one another based on any number of categories. There are times when I despair as I see this kind of hurt and hatred, hard words and death-dealing doled out so freely, and I say out loud, “the Christian project has failed. The church has epically failed to get people to understand about God’s extravagant, boundary-defying love. How deeply disappointed God must be?”

But there are other times when I see glimpses of the kind of kingdom of God about which Jesus spoke so often and so passionately. Since Advent is what the church understands to be the beginning of a new year, my new year resolution beginning in Advent is, ironically, to follow Herod’s charge to the magi: to “seek diligently.” In my case, to seek diligently for signs that human beings anywhere are living out their understanding of God’s love transcending human-created and enforced boundaries. Those signs may be in this church or others, or they may be outside the church, outside Christianity, outside my race, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity, just as the magi were outsiders in this story. They saw the star and responded to its power when others did not.

Would you do me a favor? Would you also seek diligently, and especially look for how those outside any boundaries you may have constructed about “others” in your own life are living extravagant love? Would you tell me where you see this kind of barrier-breaking love so that I can collect these stories for us to give us hope?

I’m going to end with an example that happened to me about 5 years ago. I was the pastor of the Church of the Redeemer UCC in New Haven, and our building housed several programs run by Connecticut’s largest refugee assistance agency, IRIS. One cold winter day, when our class for mothers learning English was being held, a Muslim boy from Syria, maybe 12 or 13, came to pick up his little brother. The little brother (maybe 4) had become a problem in the class, and so I had stepped out of my office to take him into our large sanctuary and let him run around and get some energy out. His brother found us in the empty sanctuary, stepping inside slowly. I ran out for a minute to grab the phone in the nearby office, and when I went back, this young man was standing in the chancel chanting. His face was so serene, I assumed it was a prayer. When he saw me, he stopped and looked afraid, as if he had done something wrong. I smiled at him, realizing that he had picked up the vibes of this being a place of worship, a place to be close to God, and expressing that the only way he knew, in his song. I said to him, “Koran?” He smiled and nodded. I smiled, too, and told him to finish his song, which he did, holding his little brother’s hand.

Light shone on us, unexpectedly, that frigid afternoon. I continue to hold onto those moments when my hope for humanity runs dry. Star of wonder, indeed. Guide us to thy perfect light. Amen.