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Matthew 2:1-12
How Does A Weary World Rejoice? We Keep Seeking.

Nineteenth century poet Sarah Williams opens *The Old Astronomer to His Pupil* with these words:

Reach me down my Tycho Brahe,
I would know him when we meet,
When I share my later science, sitting humbly at his feet;
He may know the law of all things, yet be ignorant of how
We are working to completion, working on from then to now.¹

When I imagine in my mind's eye the magi, someone like the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe comes to mind. Brahe was noted for his precise measurements and observations of the night sky, working in the mid-late 1500's, before the invention of the telescope. He was a keen observer, watching and monitoring the heavens for changes. As Brahe's biographer Dr. Adam Mosely notes, "In 1572, Brahe observed a supernova in the constellation of Cassiopeia. Brighter than Venus, the new star remained visible for a year and a half. In 1577, he observed a comet. Current theory taught that both were disturbances in the atmosphere. However, Brahe's precise measurements revealed differently. He proved that the supernova never changed with regard to the surrounding stars and that the comet orbited beyond the path of the moon, contradicting the idea that the heavens never changed."²

As our second magi or wise one shared with us "My friends and I studied the charts and peered into the night sky. When we saw his star rise, we knew we had to go. The heavens were on the move, the time was right. So we started packing our bags."³ The heavens were on the move...only by studying, seeking, paying close attention did our magi notice that the heavens were on the move.

For as we heard the third magi say, they were on a journey that was different from the beginning. Because they didn't know the destination, only the direction. And these seeking magi make an interesting contrast to the also seeking King Herod.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when the magi arrived in Jerusalem they asked "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." As our first magi shared: "When we arrived in Judea, we

¹ The full poem can be found at: <https://allpoetry.com/The-Old-Astronomer-to-his-Pupil>

² Emily Staniforth and Nola Taylor Tillman Tycho. Brahe: Colorful life, accomplishments and bizarre death. Space.com; updated June 21, 2023 <https://www.space.com/19623-tycho-brahe-biography.html>

³ *Different from the Beginning: A Magi's Tale*, based on Matthew 2:1-12 was adapted from text by Rev. Karen Ware Jackson; 2015.

went to see the King because it just made sense. Perhaps it was his child who had been born. If not, surely he would know where to find him. Either way, you don't show up in someone else's country unannounced. That's espionage. And we weren't spies, we were emissaries."⁴ Oh yes, the magi were seeking all right, seeking information in their confidence of meeting the one who the stars had announced.

But when King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet."

King Herod – the mighty King Herod – was frightened. I can imagine him scrolling through his social media feed in a frenzy, looking for selfies with babies, and the hashtag #babyking and #royalweeone. Frantically he searched for tweets and retweets that might make a reference to a special baby. He didn't even care that his feed was now going to be filled with ads for diapers and bottles and onesies. He needed to know who was this Messiah – this anointed one – this king to be born. And after working himself into a tizzy, he hastily summoned all of his advisors to the palace and demanded they share what they knew. After all he was the King and how dare they keep this information a secret from him.

Oh yes, King Herod was seeking all right, seeking out of his insecurity and fear. He was weary. He lived at time when the geopolitical situation was tense. Not sure who he could trust. Not sure he could keep the lid on the brewing tensions throughout Judea. He had the backing of Rome – after all his father had been appointed by Julius Caesar. Herod had been successful when he was appointed the provincial governor of Galilee, dutifully collecting the taxes and getting them back to Rome and clearing the area of outlaws. He had such a good relationship with the acting Roman governor of the area, that he was promoted to control more territory. And Mark Antony rewarded him by making him a tetrarch, one of four leaders of good swatch of the Roman territory. And then the big promotion. While visiting Rome, the Roman Senate appointed him, Herod, King of the Jews.⁵ This was no easy feat. Herod remembered all of the back room drama, the promises made; a few kept, most abandoned in the greater interest, or so Herod told himself. So the news from these itinerant star followers had shaken him up. He, Herod, was the King of the Jewish people. He needed to know – he needed to know to whom these magi were referring. To whom were they going to pay homage? The should be paying homage to him, the great King Herod. Fear and then anger coursed through his veins. If there was someone else that people thought was the king, he needed to root them out and dispose of them. He needed answers from the stars and he needed it right now. Unambiguous, clear-cut answers to where this child was. That is what he needed. No more diddling about, seeking guidance from the skies. There was a lot at stake.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

And the magi continued their journey, following the star. As we heard from the second magi, “Stars are really quite large. Their guidance is usually more abstract. Maybe this wasn’t the right town, or the right time. Maybe our friends were right to wait, gather more information. We began to worry.” “But then, the star stopped,” said the third wise one. “At a stable - a cave really, behind an inn. It wasn’t the sort of place you would expect a King to be born, but we didn’t think of that until later, we were just overcome with joy!”

Even though she would not pen her poem for more than 1800 years, Sarah Williams knew how the magi felt. “Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.”⁶

The magi went seeking knowing not the destination, but confident in the direction. The journey was wearying; day after day; night after night. Camels to be fed and watered. Yes, they were tired, but the magi were not afraid, for they loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night. They knew that seeking out the Light was their task, their call, their mission. And armed with this knowledge, they could revel in the journey as they sought out this child who was born King of the Jews.

As I sat with scripture this week, I thought about the times in my life when I was much more like Herod than the magi. When I was seeking information from a place of fear, from a desire to control a situation. I remember what that feels like – the tension and the tightness. And I also remembered what it feels like, to be seeking like the magi. To be seeking with confidence, to be seeking out of a place of certainty that God is with us.

Herod and the magi, like all of us I suspect were seeking meaning in their lives and in the world. They were attempting to make sense in a world that more often than not, doesn’t make much sense. Where is this one who will be known as Jesus? Where is the one who is a king, yet born without pomp and circumstance? Where does this Jesus fit into my life? What if I have doubts about some of the details – not sure how they all fit together in the big scheme?

What I love about the story of the magi – of the wise ones – was that they valued the seeking, the journey of meaning making as much – or likely more – than having all of the answers tied up in a neat package with a bow on the top. These magi – these wise ones – had a lot of knowledge. They knew how to read the stars and use them for navigation. And yet, they were open to new wisdom.

The word “magi” suggests they were from Persia. Scripture doesn’t tell us their faith traditions, although scholars speculate that they were practitioners of Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion characterized by prophetic teachings about the triumph of good over evil. Maybe they were seeking examples of this promise. What we do know is that they were

⁶ Sarah Williams. *The Old Astronomer to His Pupil*. <https://allpoetry.com/The-Old-Astronomer-to-his-Pupil>

willing risk much in pursuit of a light in the night sky that held meaning. They risked their safety, they risked looking foolish, they risked having to let go of long held beliefs and traditions.

In modern parlance, they had to risk the deconstruction of their belief system to seek meaning in the light of a star that signified something bigger than themselves. Theology professor Brian Bantum uses language that I like to describe this process of openness. He suggests that “we simply need to let the wild things grow. ... We let go of a faith that is neat rows of wheat, a faith that is neighborhood subdivisions and sidewalks that keep us on a tidy loop. ... We can see faith in the questions as much as in the answers.”⁷

In a weary world, we are called to be seekers. To be a seeker is to notice - to look for meaning. To be a seeker is to know that there is something deeper than what you see on the surface. To seek an understanding of God in nature, in music, in art, in relationships. To be a seeker is to believe in your very core that we can see faith in the questions as much as in the answers. That we can read scripture with openness to the Holy Spirit’s guidance, open to what might be speaking into our lives right now, in this moment. A word of encouragement, a word of challenge, a word of reassurance, a word of hope, a word you didn’t know that you needed to hear.

Last year we introduced the practice of sharing Star Words on Epiphany Sunday. As the creators of the Sanctified Art liturgy relate, “There are many reasons behind this tradition. First, we know that the Magi followed a star, which ultimately led them to Jesus. Therefore, we too use all the resources we have available to us—including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year—to move closer to Jesus. Secondly, we trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. Star words are one such lens that might provide us with a way to look for God in our midst, both actively and in hindsight. Finally, we know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God as opposed to silence or contemplation. However, this prayer practice invites a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful way to connect with God.”⁸

While we partake of the Lord’s Supper this morning, you will be invited to take a Star Word from the baskets at front of the side aisles. Consider the word on your star as a guiding word for the year ahead. I invite you to remember your Star Word often, seeking the ways God might be moving through the varied meanings the word contains. If you are not able to be with us in person this morning and would like a Star Word, please contact me and I will give you one. Join me prayer.

⁷ Brian Bantum. The roots of my deconstruction. *Christian Century*, December 2022. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/roots-my-deconstruction>

⁸ Sarah (Are) Speed. Liturgy for Epiphany Star Words. sanctifiedart.com