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"On Being and Following a Star"

Matthew 22:1-12

I invite you to look with me today at a most ancient, well-known text about magi following a star, at a contemporary, less well-known text by a wise woman following her call, and to consider together our capacity and call to shine.

First of all, in the story of the magi, as in much of the biblical text, there's much we don't really know. For starters, there weren't necessarily three magi, but since three gifts were described, tradition has given each gift a "wise man" to carry it. These wise men were also likely not kings, as some traditions and carols will say, but astrologers or sages from Persia or China or Babylon. The story in Matthew is puzzling when held alongside Luke's birth account, which features poverty, livestock and shepherds. Matthew's features wealthy travelers, gifts of gold, and astronomical and astrological displays.

What has caught my attention more than the magi this year, is the part played by the "star in the east" (the NRSV translates it, "star in its rising") in the story. Much of this was spurred by an article I read recently about a contemporary astronomer's speculations:

Astronomer Michael Molnar points out that "in the east" is a literal translation of the Greek phrase en te anatole, which was a technical term used in Greek mathematical astrology 2,000 years ago. It described, very specifically, a planet that would rise above the eastern horizon just before the sun would appear. Then, just moments after the planet rises, it disappears in the bright glare of the sun in the morning sky. Except for a brief moment, no one can see this "star in the east." [1]

It's not an uncommon event even; it's one that's identified in modern astronomy,[2] as well, as all the planets orbit the sun, there are times when the sun is between us and another planet for months of time, in such a way that their light disappears. Whenever a star appeared again, in the east, briefly, it was considered significant, astrologically, especially when the planet reappearing was king Jupiter. As for the star "stopping" in the sky above Bethlehem:

The word comes from the Greek word epano, which also had an important meaning in ancient astrology. It refers to a particular moment when a planet stops moving and changes apparent direction from westward to eastward motion. This occurs when the Earth, which orbits the Sun more quickly than Mars or Jupiter or Saturn, catches up with, or laps, the other planet.[3] [4]

According to his calculations, there would have been a window of time 2000 years ago when Jupiter and earth's orbits would have been such that they would have been in just the right position vis-à-vis the sun, that Jupiter would have been re-appearing, in the east, ever-so-briefly, before the sun rose, and then some months later, would have appeared to "stop" as its movement across the sky changed directions.

Attempts to prove the historicity of the star are interesting, but what I find most intriguing is simply the idea that the "star in the east" might actually have been a planet. In the context of this whole story, where a baby human is really God, a king is really a scared, insecure child, and the ones who recognize the prophecy are adherents of *another* religion, to find out that the star was maybe a planet feels fitting.

Apparently the word for planet comes from the Greek for "wandering star" because their movement through the night skies, contrasted the fixed stars and constellations but the planets themselves are balls of gas, liquid or rock that emit no light in and of themselves. But the light of the sun is so intense that its *reflected* light off of a planet millions of miles away can make that planet the brightest star in the sky. A planet doesn't need to be on fire to shine, to dazzle with its light. Sometimes God takes human form.

Sometimes an oversized chunk of rock and gas can shine as bright as a star. Sometimes magi of a different faith can see what you're missing in your own.

If those things can happen, maybe there's hope for me, too. To be inhabited by the divine from time to time. To shine, even though I am far from incandescent. To experience God, within and beyond creeds and religious institutions and boundaries.

The 20th century wise men of Pink Floyd also sang of the luminosity of people and rocks: "Shine on, you crazy diamond! Come on you target for faraway laughter, come on you stranger you legend, you martyr, and shine!"

Forty years ago, in 1974, the same year that Pink Floyd premiered that song, a group of wise women was gathering here in the US on a very different kind of stage. They sought to honor their call to ministry as priests in the Episcopal Church, which was refusing to ordain women to the priesthood. These 11 women came to be known as the Philadelphia 11 when they presented themselves nonetheless and were ordained in a service by 3 supportive bishops. Two years later, the General Convention gathered and voted to officially open ordination to women. The path was not an easy one, and the very act of serving communion caused some of those "prematurely" ordained women to be convicted and disciplined by ecclesiastical courts. [5]

One of the Philadelphia 11, Alla Renée Bozarth, is a poet in addition to being a priest. On the 25th anniversary of those audacious ordinations, she wrote a poem called, "Passover Remembered." I invite you to hear it as one wise person's scribing of the Voice that beckoned and sustained her, as wisdom for all who seek to follow the star they have glimpsed, or who dare to shine, in all their earthy, planetary-ness. For all who

simply *will be* aligned with the Light of Love.

She speaks of the realities of such journeys. Perhaps you will hear these words in the light of new resolutions, or advice/reassurance/wisdom for a road you've been traveling for some long while. Settle in for a listen -- it's long, but worth it:

Passover Remembered Pack Nothing. Bring only your determination to serve and your willingness to be free.

Don't wait for the bread to rise. Take nourishment for the journey, but eat standing, be ready

to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave

your old ways behind— fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need of the time— to love justice and walk humbly with your God.

Do not take time to explain to the neighbors. Tell only a few trusted friends and family members.

Then begin quickly, before you have time to sink back into the old slavery.

Set out in the dark. I will send fire to warm and encourage you. I will be with you in the fire and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food and find refuge in new places. I will give you dreams in the desert

to guide you safely home to that place

you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around your fires in the dark will make you strong and wise.

Outsiders will attack you, and some who follow you, and at times you will weary and turn on each other from fear and fatigue and blind forgetfulness.

You have been preparing for this for hundreds of years. I am sending you into

the wilderness to make a way and to learn my ways more deeply.

Those who fight you will teach you. Those who fear you will strengthen you. Those who follow you may forget you. Only be faithful. This alone matters.

Some of you will die in the desert, for the way is longer than anyone imagined. Some of you will give birth.

Some will join other tribes along the way, and some will simply stop and create new families in a welcoming oasis.

Some of you will be so changed by weathers and wanderings that even your closest friends will have to learn your features as though for the first time. Some of you will not change at all.

Some will be abandoned by your dearest loves and misunderstood by those who have known you since birth and feel abandoned by you.

Some will find new friendship in unlikely faces, and old friends as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame.

Wear protection. Your flesh will be torn as you make a path with your bodies

through sharp tangles.

Wear protection.

Others who follow may deride or forget the fools who first bled where thorns once were, carrying them away in their own flesh.

Such urgency as you now bear may embarrass your children who will know little of these times.

Sing songs as you go, and hold close together. You may at times grow confused and lose your way.

Continue to call each other by the names I've given you, to help remember who you are. You will get where you are going by remembering who you are.

Touch each other and keep telling the stories of old bondage and of how I delivered you.

Tell your children lest they forget

and fall into danger— remind them even they were not born in freedom but under a bondage they no longer remember, which is still with them, if unseen.

Or they were born in the open desert where no signposts are.

Make maps as you go, remembering the way back from before you were born.

So long ago you fell into slavery, slipped into it unawares, out of hunger and need.

You left your famished country for freedom and food in a new land, but you fell unconscious and passive, and slavery overtook you as you fell asleep in the ease of your life.

You no longer told stories of home to remember who you were.

Do not let your children sleep through the journey's hardship. Keep them awake and walking on their own feet so that you both remain strong and on course.

So you will be only the first of many waves of deliverance on these desert seas.

It is the first of many beginnings— your Paschaltide. Remain true to this mystery.

Pass on the whole story. I spared you all by calling you forth from your chains.

Do not go back. I am with you now and I am waiting for you.

by Alla Renée Bozarth [6]

So, this Sunday before Epiphany, that celebration of light even in the briefest of glimpses, before the light of day and its many obligations obscures and eclipses the Star in the East, I invite you to join in the feast of communion, where we share with one another a meal to sustain us on our star-journeys. As you walk toward the starlight of the Christ and Advent candles, and toward this shared meal, I invite you to think of the light that is drawing you, beckoning you to respond to its call; what it might be nudging you to make room for, what gifts it knows you carry within you, what a gift you are ...

Let that guide your path to communion this day. We share this meal together, as

Jesus did, that once-child who inspired wonder, at whose feet precious gifts were laid, to whom the light led, and by whom the world is lit. That child who grew to a man, whose journey was hard, and often lonely, but who ate often, and in the company of friends both loyal and fickle, pious and pagan. Let us, too, remember him, (which is, after all, the one gift he asked of us—to remember him when we break bread together) and share this meal together.

[1] David Weintraub, Professor of Astronomy at Vanderbilt University. “Can astronomy explain the biblical star of Bethlehem?” *The Conversation*. December 23, 2014.
<http://theconversation.com/can-astronomy-explain-the-biblical-star-of-bethlehem-35126>

[2] Ibid. It’s modern terminology is a “heliacal rising”

[3] Ibid.

[4] Or, in modern parlance, “retrograde motion.”

[5] The Archives of the Episcopal Church, July 31, 1974.
http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=74200, among other sources.

[6] Published in several books, including: *Womanpriest: A Personal Odyssey* (1998) by the author and *This is My Body: Praying for the Earth, Praying from the Heart* (2004) by the author. Found here (thanks to Megan Ramer):
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/passover-remembered/>

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