

## *The Pull of the Star*

First Congregational Branford

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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In this scripture, the prophet Isaiah addresses the despair of Israel's exile, their long season of darkness. He says something new is happening - God is ending the exile! Isaiah understands the coming of God into the world as a brilliant light - with the power that will transform and restore Israel.

Hear now Isaiah prophesy: Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' 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:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it

stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Oh, my Sabbath Kings and Queens, how I wish this was only a nice, sweet Magi story. After a turbulent 2018 you may have just wanted to hear a nice story for the New Year. The magi *is* a nice story, but it's also a dangerous story.

To begin, we don't know how many magi there were. Legend has the number at either three or twelve. What the magi had seen in the sky is impossible to say. Science tells us that Saturn and Jupiter were in close conjunction several times in that era and may have appeared as a new and unique star. Whatever it was, they saw something, *they had an epiphany*, that what they'd seen was associated with the expected arrival of the King of the Jews. *It was as Isaiah foretold!* So, with the curiosity of great scientists and philosophers, they set out to investigate in order to pay homage to this king. They were pulled by the star!

Imagine, if you will, the sight of these pagan priests in Jerusalem adorned in beautiful, glittery robes carrying treasures! When the magi asked Jews along the way, "*Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star rise in the East and we have come to worship him,*" they would not have been especially welcomed. Jews in the first century believed that astrology and soothsaying were evil pagan magic. And, it didn't help that these *magicians* were from Persia - now Iran, which wasn't exactly a popular Jewish destination. But, the magi would not be deterred by prejudice. They had a mission. *That's just the way it is* when the star has a pull on you. Amen?

Forty years before the birth of Jesus, Herod had been appointed "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate, and had been in control for over three decades. He didn't want any rival King of the Jews appearing on the scene. Like many rulers, Herod was a ruthless and bloodthirsty tyrant, especially with any threat to his power. During his reign the people of Jerusalem had already seen him murder his wife, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, an uncle and many, many others. You could say *he* was pulled by fear and jealousy.

Herod called together the chief priests and all the teachers of the law. They had no trouble nominating Bethlehem as the expected birthplace of the Messiah, as it had been prophesied by the prophet Micah.

When Herod heard about the magi, he didn't have them arrested or deported

from the city - he was far too cunning for that; he knew that if these people had made the effort to come all the way from Persia, they'd probably continue their detective work until they tracked down this newborn king - and that would save *him* the trouble of locating the appropriate baby to murder. So he had the magi summoned, and he wined and dined them in the palace dining hall and promised them all kinds of assistance. Then, before informing the magi how to get to Bethlehem, Herod requested they bring him word when they found the child so that *he* could go and pay homage... yeah, right.

Even though the chief priests and teachers of the law knew all the prophecies, and understood the scriptures, God hadn't chosen them to inform of the Messiah's moment of arrival. Do you see what God did? The God of Israel chose the magi - who were not only foreign Gentiles, but despised pagans! God used them to represent the inclusivity of all the nations receiving the Messiah. The light was pulling in everyone. This is so exciting!

The magi entered the house, under the star that had pulled them through harsh travel conditions, and very little if any welcome, but when they saw the child in his mother's arms, these foreign dignitaries, these *wise ones*, they threw themselves at the feet of a baby in Bethlehem, and declared *him* to be the King of the Jews. The magi opened their treasures and presented him with the sort of gifts that were presented to kings. Then, having been warned in a dream *not* to return to Herod, they returned to their own country *by another road*.

Here's where the birth story turns tragic - when Herod saw that he'd been duped, he dispatched death squads to slaughter every boy less than two years old in Bethlehem.

Herod was threatened by the pull of the star - a star that was going to change everything, where the *first* would be last, and the last would be first, a star that was representing God's love for all - ALL - this ALL is still a dangerous message.

I once read a scripture commentator's words: "tell a Nazi, God loves Jews; tell an Al-Qaeda terrorist God loves Americans; tell an American fundamentalist Christian that God loves homosexuals and doesn't need them to change; tell a Ku Klux Klan member that black people are equal - and you might still find death squads dispatched." Sadly, it's still one of the most revolutionary things you can say: *God came for all*; and *the last shall be first*...

Beloved, in this brutal world, I watch you, I really do, and I see the pull of the star in your life. I see what you do to shine a light in the darkness. You serve, you volunteer, you take a hand, you write posts online, you go to Florida and help cleanup where the hurricane hit, you feed the hungry, reach out to kids at risk on Killam's Point, have Take a Vet Fishing, and in your compassion you're now wondering if there's anything we can do to help federal employees affected by the government shutdown.

I'll share that the pull of the star on my life this week has been in having to let go of my almost 18 year old son more and more. The star is tugging on my heart and hands to release. My husband said: *Suz, Abe's a senior, it's time for him to spread his wings.* I have to grow into my parenting of treating him like an adult. I don't want to, but, when Jesus has a pull on you, you must go by the road that he lays out before you. You don't have to like it!!! That's an important part to remember, okay? You don't have to like it - but it's what he wants, and he knows better for you.

But, here's the warm part. The truth is, none of us go by the pull of the star alone. The magi needed help finding their way. lol, even though they were men, they asked for help and directions! We all need help finding our way. We lean on one another, don't we? Sue Miller, Bob Zettergren, Nancy Johnson, Jeff Buggee, Lou Bocciarelli, Julia Novaco and her children are leaning on us now to love and help them find their way through health and family challenges. There are teens and parents of teens who are trying to find their way. Teens are overwhelmed with life, and parents are tired from it all. We not only need the star, we need each other to help navigate where the star is leading.

After the 8:00, a worshiper said to me, "Abe has to go out and find his wisdom. That's the pull of the star on his life." Okay. Wow. We try to control our youth, but they have a pull on their life - that takes precedent over us...

Don't have to like it!

In 2019, may we, may the church, *allow* the star to chart our future. Just like the magi, *and* poet Robert Frost, let's go by another road, *by one less traveled.* Be willing to take some risks. Take some risks, FCC. You have the courage to do that because the light goes with you - Arise, shine, your light has come, and it shines on *you* today. - candle ritual

(In front of unlit candle)

Take a moment to consider the pull of the star on you today.

Take this quiet time and be pulled...

Does it hurt... does it bring you joy...

What is it pulling you to do, who is it pulling you to be?

(Light candle)

In Christ, God has given us a new light, and *shows us a well lit path in the darkness.* We pray through God's holy, holy son, Amen.