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**A SERMON on Matthew 2:1-12 for the Epiphany of Our Lord (observed)**  
***Preached 1 January 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister***  
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*“Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky. Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are.”*

I must admit that it’s hard for me to imagine being the magi, the so-called “wise men.” As the story goes, these people, these astrologers or fortune tellers—not “kings” as many a song and Christmas pageant feature—these astrologers apparently see some *new* star in the sky... some sort of new light up there in the heavens that they weren’t expecting... some twinkling little star that left them wondering what it was.

Now, I myself am admittedly not given much to gazing upon the night sky. Obviously, living in urban areas with plenty of light pollution doesn’t make it the easiest, anyway, but even back in the little rural farm town in which I grew up, I don’t remember doing much amateur astronomy after, say, elementary school age. And even if I *were* an avid star-gazer, I still do not suspect I’d think very much of seeing some so-called “new star” that I hadn’t seen before. Perhaps it was simply one I’d missed. Or maybe it was just one of the planets, whose orbit had brought it into new view. For us in the modern age, it’s pretty easy to assume a reasonable scientific explanation for discovering a “new” star “at its rising”.

So, it’s a little hard for me to imagine being these magi from the East. Maybe that’s a good thing. After all, magi were not viewed very highly in their time. Much of scripture tells us that magi were “idoltrous deceivers” who really should be avoided by “Godly” folk. Even in today’s scene from Matthew’s gospel, where the magi are not judged against, they still come across as a bit strange, perhaps even a bit like bumbling fools. They choose to trek out across hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles to follow a “new” star that they’ve seen—I mean, really, how do you “follow” a star to some particular destination? And then, by the time they’ve gotten pretty close—Bethlehem and Jerusalem are only about 6 or 7 miles from one another—they can’t figure out where it is that they’re supposed to go. In fact, there’s some evidence that they couldn’t see that star any more: the star went ahead of them, the story tells us, but it doesn’t actually say that the magi could see it again until they got to the house where Jesus and his family were staying.

So, these rather strange figures we call the magi, these weird astrologer-fortune-tellers who chase stars and go wandering across the desert and bumble around half-lost... perhaps it’s ok that I have a hard time imagining myself following in their somewhat crazy footsteps.

On the other hand, though, what if there *is* something to be said for having a “magi moment” every once in a while...?

You can judge them crazy or not, as you wish, but can’t deny the fact that these magi were profoundly open to something new happening in their midst. We today may not think much of star-gazing for discerning important matters, but still, we can’t fault the magi for having “trained [themselves] to raise their eyes to the horizon of God’s activity in the world”. They saw something new and had the curiosity and openness to go on a wild ride and find out what could be happening. They trekked out on a strange road, not needing to know where it would lead... simply

willing to follow, to explore, to discover, to experience and wonder.

Of course, that profound openness, and that willing journey, we today remember it not for its own sake, but because of what those magi *did* when they found their destination. After all, as one Methodist pastor from New York City reminds his readers, “Not every committed Christian in name has a taste for actually kneeling in the dust and muck of a barn in a backwater town with astonished recognition that this is where God prefers to make an entrance.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we who dwell in relatively comfortable middle-class first-world communities, not only are we seldom ready to trek off on hair-brained journeys with no more assurance to guide us than some star-gazing... We certainly don’t not expecting to kneel in “dust and muck” when we find that place of God.

So, yes, indeed: perhaps there is something to be said for having a “magi moment” every once-in-a-while... to be profoundly open to how God might be doing something new... to be willing to humble ourselves when that new-something isn’t quite as we expected it to be.

But, you know, even at that, I’m not sure it is enough for us simply to talk *ourselves* into having these “magi moments”. In the Epiphany story, the true gift that comes in the ‘magi moment’ is a gift given to ones who are “other”. After going to such great lengths to situate Jesus within the overarching story of the Hebrew people—from Matthew’s exhaustive genealogy of Jesus that puts him in the family tree of Abraham and David, to his repeated reminders that things were happening to “fulfill what was written”—here Matthew is, at the very beginnings of the story, showcasing Jesus being worshiped by crazy guys from some other land—Gentiles, foreigners, outsiders. It is the outsider, the ‘other’, the unexpected who end up kneeling down at the beginning of Matthew’s story, a story that will eventually end with the command to make “disciples of all nations”. The story of the magi, it turns out, is a story about others.

And, my friends, so should *our* story be: a story about others. It is not enough just for us to talk *ourselves* into a greater openness to God’s work in the world... but rather for us to receive and welcome *others* who, out of their hunger or curiosity or openness, have set out across the desert to find some sign of God’s presence. It is not enough, as we wrap up the season of Christmas, for us to kneel one more time at the manger. Rather we must stand as a beacon, a light, a star, calling others to come and discover the God who has been born among us.

“Arise, shine: for your light has come” calls out the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s promise is not that God’s light *is coming* to his people, but that it *has come*... the light is *already* theirs. The glory of the Lord has *already* risen upon them. And in the presence of such light, Isaiah tells his community that *they* will be radiant, that nations will come to *their* light, to the brightness of *their* dawn.

My friends, we have seen the star, and its light shines upon us. May we arise and shine. May we call forth every seeking soul and welcome every crazy outsider. And may we all—  
together—wonder, kneel, follow, and believe.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bauman, reflections on Matthew 2:1-12, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 214.