

Wisdom in the Night

Matthew 2:13-23

Crossroads Christian Church

John 1:1-5

January 11, 2015 Epiphany 1A

There's a fascination to the night sky. On a cold crisp clear January night you can almost see forever, literally. Light from those stars has traveled light years, light centuries, light millennia, and more to reach us. Over in the brightest constellation in the sky, Orion, low in the southeast, you can find the three stars in a line that form the belt, and then look diagonally down for the dimmer stars that form the sword. On a really clear night you can see a patchy fuzz of light there that's the great nebula of Orion. That nebula, gas cloud, is a star nursery, where new stars are being born. The more we find out about the universe, the more awe and wonder fills our hearts. Its vastness goes beyond human comprehension. And behind all that only one thing is greater—God. There's a fascination to the night sky.

Magi, the philosophers in the royal courts of the ancient near east, studied the sky carefully. They weren't astronomers in the modern sense, because that science didn't exist then. Yet they knew the sky's harmony and predictability. They watched the grand dance of the cosmos with great care and recorded any change, any anomaly. We don't know for sure what it was that they saw on those nights so many centuries ago. Most likely it was a conjunction of planets in a certain constellation. It could have been a comet. It could have been a nova or supernova. There are a lot of theories but no one knows for sure. Whatever it was, it caused a group of Magi to make a pilgrimage. Something special was going to happen, the way they read that sign in the sky. And it was going to happen in that little land of Judea. It must be the birth of a great king, one sent by the gods, to create such an omen. So they set out. We don't know how long they traveled, or when they arrived. But they must have been very impressed to make such a journey.

Why was this an important part of the Christmas story, and an important part of the holiday of Epiphany, which happened last Tuesday? Why do we still observe their journey by putting

the figures of wise men and camels in our nativity sets and singing songs about their coming?

Epiphany is a word that means a revealing, a revelation, or enlightenment. It's a time when God says, "Here's what it's all about." The prophet Isaiah, long before, had told of God's promise that one day, God's light would shine, and it would shine in the midst of darkness. The people of God were in exile, far away from home, when the prophet wrote these words. They were dispossessed and powerless, struggling to keep their faith alive as strangers in a strange land. Isaiah said, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. In the midst of the darkness, God's glory will become visible. Nations and kings shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

We don't know if the wise men were kings, or if they were royal representatives of the kings' courts. St. Matthew just says "wise men." But here they came, filled with hope and expectation, because God's glory was to be revealed in the birth of a new king. They weren't Jews. They represented the other nations of the earth. God invited them to a special showing, a sneak preview, if you will, of the coming of one who would be not only savior to the Jews, but savior to the world, redeemer of the nations. And that's who the wise men came to visit. So Matthew was giving us a clue that what God was doing in the birth of Jesus was really a gift to the whole world.

But it was still a world enshrouded in darkness. As John's gospel puts it, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." The wise men made a natural mistake and assumed that the baby king would be born in the palace in Jerusalem. But all they found there was King Herod, a ruler so paranoid, so tyrannical that he had killed some of his own children when he began to suspect that they might be threats to his power. The frightened king conferred with his advisors and found out that Bethlehem was the place prophesied for the birth of a king, a Messiah, a son of David. He asked the wise men to come back and tell him, so that he might worship the baby as well.

The wise men came to the home where Mary and Joseph were staying—not the stable, for this was after the birth—and presented Jesus with gifts worthy of a king—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They had a dream before they left, a dream that warned them not to go back to Herod, so they left secretly by another route.

It's a sign of wisdom to follow a star, to invest yourself on a journey to discover what God is revealing, what peace God is offering the world.

It's a sign of wisdom to learn from your mistakes, and that's what the wise men did. They made a tragic mistake in going to Herod, but they realized it and kept the baby Jesus and his family safe.

It's a sign of wisdom to listen to your dreams. Joseph, Mary's husband had done this when the angel told him that the baby she was carrying was God's work, not a stranger's. Joseph would listen to a dream again, when he would flee with his family to Egypt. And the wise men recognized the warning that came from God in their dreams and acted accordingly.

It's a sign of wisdom to recognize the power of evil and to try to thwart it as the wise men did in evading Herod.

Sometimes the world seems dark to us today. We worry about war and terrorism. We are concerned that the economy will fail us again and we will lose a secure and comfortable lifestyle. We grieve over the loss of those dear to us and reflect upon our own mortality. But it's a sign of wisdom to see in the darkness that stars still shine. It's a sign of wisdom to look for ways that God and God's purpose might be revealed to us. It's a sign of wisdom to know that God is revealed to us in subtle ways, that God's gifts aren't always immediately obvious.

The ultimate wisdom is recognizing, receiving, and sharing the love of God. The magi are symbols of that wisdom. We don't need arcane mysteries; we just need to know that in sending Christ, God gives us his love, and that this love is worth sharing.

Later in the service, we will lift our offerings up to God, as the wise men of old offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. Afterwards, we will be sharing in Holy Communion. Then we will receive God's gift, symbolically through

the bread and wine. We will affirm then that God's gift to each of us and to the world, our light in the darkness, is Jesus Christ. That's a good way to begin a new year, isn't it? In the year ahead, may our hearts grow ever more open to this wonderful gift of God's love. May we have the wisdom to walk as a child of the light, even in a dark world; may we have the wisdom to follow Jesus. Shine in our heart, Lord Jesus. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon