

Follow the Star – Epiphany

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

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December 31.

New Year's Eve.

Perhaps there is no other day of the year that provokes me to stop and spend time reflecting upon all that has been and all that can be more than this one.

While I am always ready to hang a new calendar and embrace the gift of a fresh start, I rarely do so without asking myself a series of questions.

What did I accomplish this year?

For what am I most grateful?

What am I longing to do or experience in the new year?

On Friday afternoon I decided to take my questions a step further and googled “yearly examen.” My quick search did not disappoint as I was led to a page with interrogations that could have consumed the entire weekend as I read an invitation to invest the days between Christmas and New Years slowly working through a deck of ten of questions including:

1. What are the most important events that have happened to me or in me this past year?
2. What are the greatest breakthroughs in any category of my life this past year? (physical, emotionally, relationally, vocationally, spiritually, with other people)
3. What has been my greatest struggle in my life this past year?
4. What has been my greatest and deepest loss this past year?
5. What has been the area that has consumed my thinking, attention and focus this past year? (health, relationship, future, etc)
6. Where have I felt most vulnerable in my life? (What area of your life do you feel the most naked, susceptible, and exposed?)
7. Where have I most experienced the presence of God this past year and why?¹

I find each of the questions helpful, with some of them leading to moments of joy and gratitude and others leading to a touch of pain or place of regret.

And while many of the questions fill me with a sense of satisfaction, the final question leaves me longing for more because no matter how often I have experienced God, it is never enough.

What about you?

Do you have enough of God in your life?

Or are you, too, longing for more?

I wonder what the wise men from the East were longing for when they made the journey to Jerusalem?

¹ <https://www.pottersinn.com/articles/ze2mmwjthj54t86slz2tcrrhfz49ty>

What were they hoping to receive when they followed a star?

My favorite preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes how the star “was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.”²

Are you familiar with this tug—the pull that leads you to suspect how there must be more to life than what you currently see?

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests the wise men were all eager for an excuse to get out of town--“away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns.”³

Can you relate to wanting to escape the expectations others have for you—or perhaps the ones you have set for yourself that are unrealistically high, demanding more from you than is sensible physically, spiritually, or emotionally? I can.

Whatever their reason for following the star, we know that it led them to Jerusalem where they ask where the child is who has been born king of the Jews. When word of their arrival and the reason behind it reaches King Herod, King Herod and all of Jerusalem become frightened. Herod then asks the most educated individual in the palace where the Messiah was to be born. The scribes and pharisees know what the prophet Micah foretold:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel.”⁴

Herod offers the information to the visitors, and we learn how scripture *and* their willingness to follow a star leads them to Bethlehem where they find Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

Beloveds, I cannot understand who God is or how God works without spending time with God through the study of scripture—even if it is as simple as reading a Psalm a day or two or three verses in whatever devotional has captured my attention. Scripture is the place where our faith is most revealed.

But scripture is not enough for me to know where or how God is leading me. Like the wise men, I need to pay attention to what captures my attention—a rainbow that reminds me of how God keeps God’s promises, a song that begs me to slow down, a feeling in my gut that pushes me to say something, a sense in my heart that opens me to embrace change on the horizon. And when I feel God at work, my task, like the wise men, is to seek to faithfully follow where God is leading.

The wise men allow a star and a dream to guide their decisions. The star leads them to Jerusalem, and a dream leads them to avoid Jerusalem on their way home. Rather than bringing word to Herod about where they found Jesus, as he requested them to do, the wise people left for their own country by another road. They sidestep Herod’s fear and violent ways.

Herod believes himself to be king. But Herod is immediately filled with fear when the wise people ask for the child who has been born king of the Jews. My former professor, Stanley

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Boston: Cowley, 1999), 28.

³ Brown Taylor, 29.

⁴ Micah 5:2.

Hauerwas, notes how “Herod’s fear of this baby reveals the depth of his fragility.” He continues, “Herods know that their positions require constant vigilance, because any change may well make their insecure positions more insecure. Herods rule in fear by employing fear as a means to secure power.”⁵

Herod’s ways of ruling are in stark contrast to the ways of the child born in Bethlehem. The newborn king’s most powerful tool is not violence but love. His ways are not exclusion of the outcast but embrace of the most vulnerable. Indeed, Epiphany reveals how his love and embrace are for all people—including the Gentiles the wise men represent. In the words of Malcolm Guite, “...in the Incarnation Christ, in assuming human nature, takes on, becomes involved in, visits and redeems the whole of humanity, not just the chosen people to whose race and culture he belonged.”⁶

In Jesus, God has actively chosen to become involved in, visit, and redeem all of humanity—not just those who are part of the race and culture to whom he belonged. Beloveds, this fullness is how we got included as recipients of Jesus’ love, mercy, and grace! And this message, a message of good news for all the world, will always be threatening for any person who has been tempted to believe that one’s race or citizenship triumphs God’s divine imprint and all-encompassing love.

The wise people understand how everything has changed and will continue to change through the child who has been born king of kings. They also know how those in power will fiercely wield it against them for even suggesting that they change their deeply held convictions. It is why they go home another way.

Meanwhile Herod reveals the depth of his depravity and the power of fear’s grip. “Such fear,” Hauerwas explains, “recognizes no limit because it draws its strength from death.”⁷ Herod is so afraid that he later orders the killing of all children born in and around Bethlehem under the age of two which is the time he estimated it would take for the wise people to reach Israel. Hauerwas rightly notes how “Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants.”⁸

As of last Thursday, more than 8,663 Palestinian children have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza.⁹

Allow that number to sink in for a moment.

My wise professor suggests that “those who would follow and worship Jesus are a challenge to those who would kill children.”¹⁰

I wonder, then, what it would take for people of faith to rise up and be a challenge today—to not go along as if everything is okay but to sidestep the world’s power and go home by another way.

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 38.

⁶ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting on the Word* (London: Canterbury, 2015), 152

⁷ Hauerwas, 41.

⁸ Hauerwas, 41.

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/12/28/israel-hamas-war-live-israel-kills-palestinians-in-central-gaza-attacks#:~:text=Israel's%20war%20on%20Gaza's%20children,the%20rubble%20amid%20relentless%20bombardment.>

¹⁰ Hauerwas, 41.

What would it take for us to remove power from any Herod who insists that killing innocent people is the path to peace; any Herod who claims there is not enough for the other whoever the other might be; any Herod who believes there is one particular tribe, land, or nation God most wants to bless; any Herod who allows children to be killed by senseless acts of gun violence without ever changing a thing to prevent additional killings.

Beloveds, thanks be to God a new year is upon us! I have deep longings and high expectations for what this year will hold.

Whatever this year holds, I want to make sure I follow the stars God places in my path. And wherever these stars lead, I pray my faith in God will guide me to live and to love, to speak and to act in ways that make a difference in this weary world that is in desperate need of rejoicing.

What about you?