

The Whole World in God's Hands

Matthew 2:1-12

Center Church, Hartford

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Just note, by the way, that the last part of the reading today describes the very first act of Christian civil disobedience!

(Turned on app "Astrocantus.")

Fifty years ago, on Christmas Eve, human beings got the first pictures of what earth looks like from the moon, thanks to the astronauts of Apollo 8. You see one of them on the cover of your bulletin. *Earthrise*, they called it. Some people have credited these pictures with starting the modern environmental movement, as the fragility and splendor of our planet became clear in a new way. This little marble we live on in the vastness of stars and planets and asteroids. Wonder and amazement fell on the astronauts, and all who saw this.

What you are hearing right now as you look at that picture comes from an app called "Astrocantus." The creators use your phone's GPS to locate exactly what stars are in the sky above you. Each star is given a tone, and what you hear is the tones of the stars. As if they had not only light, but music to share with us. So many stars, so far away from this little oasis, Earth. Blue and green and cloudy white, our planet, standing out in contrast to the grey moon or space, "blacker than a thousand midnights down in a cypress swamp," as James Weldon Johnson wrote, surrounded by the music of the stars.

I wonder what music emanated from that bright star the Magi saw? If they were indeed astrologers, did they have a sense of the vastness of space and the smallness of our planet? Did they understand that there are no human boundaries visible from space? The first Chinese astronaut famously was surprised that the Great Wall of China is not visible from space!

We don't know what the Wise Men knew, or surmised. What's interesting is that they stepped out of their boundaries because something intriguing was happening somewhere else on this blue-green marble of

Earth, and they knew in a deeper way that whatever this was, was not just local. They stepped out of thinking that only their people or religion could be great and that nothing of value could be happening elsewhere. The star called to them to see, as the writer Malcolm Guite puts it, "The birth of Christ is not one small step for a local religion, but one great leap for all [humankind]."

Guite goes on to write,

*"It might have been just someone else's story,
Some chosen people get a special king.
We leave them to their own peculiar glory,
We don't belong; it doesn't mean a thing.
But when these three arrive they bring us with them,
Gentiles like us, their wisdom might be ours;
A steady step that finds an inner rhythm,
A pilgrim's eye that sees beyond the stars.
They did not know his name, but still they sought him,
They came from other-where but still they found."*

The star, you see, the light shining in the darkness, was not for Mary or Joseph or the Shepherds. They got the message in other ways. The star was for the Magi, the foreigners, the wandering wonderers! Herod had not even noticed it. And when his attention was drawn to it, his reaction was one of fear and anger, instead of curiosity and excitement. He did not want others drawn into their small story; indeed, he wanted to control the story. What if Mary and Joseph had also been afraid, and turned them and their gifts and what they knew about their son away?

God had other ideas. Perhaps, because God's view of earth looks a lot more like the picture of *Earthrise* than dividing lines on a human-drawn map. "This is not just for you, little country, though I love you deeply," God said in sending the Magi, "Remember what the prophet Isaiah said? 'It is too little a thing for you to merely restore the tribes of Jacob! I will also make you a light to those not in this land, that my saving love might reach to the ends of the earth!'"

Do you see that we are the "ends of the earth?" Do you see that anyone in this room who is not a Middle Eastern Jew is an outsider in the Christmas story? We have so often made baby Jesus blond and blue-eyed

in our manger scenes that we forget he did not look like us. His people were not our people. His people's relationship with God was very different from that of my ancestors in northern Europe 2000 years ago.

But, instead of excluding us as different or less-than deserving, God invited us in, by the light of a star, and the curiosity and wisdom and wonder and yearning and fearlessness of a few people who traveled far to get to Bethlehem to try to figure out what was happening with the birth of this child. **Instead of excluding us from blessing, God invited us in.** By the light of a star, we found our way to God-with-us, too.

The hope, of course, was that human beings might be drawn together beyond artificial divisions to join in love as Christ taught. That there would no longer be "others," just one body on this one small earth. That's still the hope, I think.

The poet Ann Weems says it this way: "It's not over, that birthing. There are always newer skies into which God can throw stars." It's not just about 1 star, but a skyfull of stars. They are calls to pay attention all over the world.

But we have to pay attention. We have to remember that we were once outsiders, foreigners, in the great story of salvation. But God called us in. God said, "Look! The stars are singing around you, reminding you that in all the space you can perceive, there is only this little planet capable of holding forms of life that have the capacity to love." Because we are outsiders in this story, we must remember to listen to outsiders today who may come bearing wisdom and gifts because they hear God calling them to something new and amazing. Imagine what might have been if Herod had sincerely wanted to learn what the Magi knew and be changed by an encounter with the unknown that might just be divine?

I wonder, then, who is seeing stars now? Who is out there seeking something they don't even have a name for? Who out there can feel deeply that there is something more for humankind than endless fighting and fear? Who challenges us to see God in a new way that we might not have imagined (no one thought of God coming as a baby!) Who out there can we welcome in to wonder with us at God's endless mercy and love? This table is for them, and also to remind us that God's love is bigger than this room and encompasses all this little blue planet, and all the stars and planets, feeding us life and love.

In this new year ahead of us, beloved, let us resolve to look to the stars, and then at each other, with wonder and curiosity, rather than fear. Let us pay attention to see what God may be doing. Let us open our hearts, our doors, our love to seekers who will bring us unexpected gifts and who will receive from us gifts we did not know we had to give. Let us receive the Christmas blessing sent from space by Apollo 8 Commander Frank Borman: "God bless all of you, all of you on the Good Earth." Amen.