

Following the Star
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
January 3, 2016
Matthew 2:1-12

The North Star shone brightly in the sky. It was more than a guide. It was the future – it was what God’s world could be. It was that place where freedom was no longer just a dream.

For two weeks, Harriet Tubman had followed this star. By day, she hid in the homes of former slaves, as well as Quakers and abolitionists. By night, she traversed the backwoods of Maryland and Delaware – the North Star her compass, and her only friend on a lonely journey.

What an anxious journey! Tubman must have been on edge with the pop of every branch under foot, or the rustling of leaves, or the discovery of new shadows and scents. To be captured meant a beating at best, death at worst. But each new step was one step closer to the star – And beneath this star lay her own personal epiphany – a life of freedom in Philadelphia, and a chance to feel whole, to feel full dignity, to live into the full potential God had for her.

On a crisp November morning in 1849, Harriet Tubman crossed into the free state of Pennsylvania. This was the first of what would be more than a dozen journeys along the Underground Railroad. She would help to free more than seventy slaves, and in all of her trips back down South, she never lost a passenger. Years later, Tubman would recall her first visions of freedom:

When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.

Stars illumine the world we long for – they dwell above the intersection of expectant hope and realized joy. For Harriet Tubman, the star led her not only to God’s promise of freedom, but also to God’s new calling for her. Like Moses before her, God equipped Tubman to be a vehicle of freedom for others.

But there must have been days when the star didn’t shine so bright, when freedom and safety seemed a distant hope. When she had gone days without eating, when her body ached from long hikes and relentless cold or heat, when the thought of one more trip seemed too daunting, where was the star? Where was the promise of the Psalmist that under God’s protection the sun would not strike her by day nor the moon by night? Tubman must have clung to the memory of the star’s light, until she could turn the next bend and see it still shining bright, still holding the promise of a prosperous future.

In today’s lection, Matthew’s Gospel recounts the story of a group of star-gazers, or star-trekkers, who just like Tubman, were following a bright star to the promise of a prosperous future.

These pilgrims have been called lots of things: Wise Men, Seers, Magi, Kings of Orient. And tradition tells us there were three of them, because when they finally met the Christ Child, they came bearing three gifts: gold and precious oils named frankincense and myrrh.

Most likely, this group of pilgrims were astrologers, people familiar with the stars, people who knew that great potential could be found under heavenly bodies that shone the brightest. And there’s no telling how many were in this group. If you want to imagine three people that’s fine. But I think they were more inclusive. Since they were star-trekkers, let’s just label them an enterprising group, as big or as small as you want to make them.

Matthew tells us that our pilgrims arrive in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is this child who has been born King of the Jews?”

Two years earlier, the Christ Child had been born in a small town in Israel, and ever since that day, a bright star shone above his presence. Our pilgrims sought this star, and they sought to meet the One who made it shine. It led them to Jerusalem.

As I prepared for this week’s sermon I found myself interested not in what the text tells us, but rather, in what it doesn’t.

Why does Matthew not tell us more of this journey from the East? I want some details.

What power would the story of the Exodus hold, if the only details we heard were the crossing of the Red Sea or Joshua’s entry into the promised-land? What power would the story of Underground Railroad hold, if we didn’t hear about Harriet Tubman’s journey? What power does the story of the Christ hold, if we do not walk the journey with him?

If you’ll indulge me, I want to spend a moment thinking about this journey to Jerusalem.

Our pilgrims travelled from the East, perhaps Babylon, making their way, slowly but surely, to a star they dreamed would lead them to God’s chosen. Astrologers were in high demand, especially by powerful rulers. Our pilgrims had seen their share of rulers – some who claimed to be divine, some who ruled with iron fists, some who longed to be born into another profession, some whose every decision stemmed from the interpretation of dreams or signs – and all of these rulers, seeking to make this world their world, not God’s world.

And then one day, a star told our pilgrims, “All of that’s changing. A child is born, and with this birth, something extraordinary is happening. God’s world will once more become God’s world.”

So off our pilgrims went. The star in front of them, but still so far away. Perhaps they’d rise in the morning and hike five, ten, even twenty miles, but at day’s end, the star felt no closer. “Will we ever get there?” they wondered.

Perhaps there were days when they didn’t see another living soul. How many days did they sleep in the elements? How many campfires full of mystery chili, if they were lucky enough to have anything to eat at all? How many passing caravans? Are they friendly, or are they raiders? How many cloudy nights, when they had to trust the star was where they anticipated it to be?

For two years they followed this star for the promise of something better. And then one day, far off in the distance, they saw the faint skyline of Jerusalem. “We are near!” our pilgrims proclaim.

In Jerusalem, they met King Herod, who was like too many of the rulers they had known. Herod feared this child would shake things up, make him vulnerable, threaten his power, maybe even weaken the trust of his Roman allies. “When you get there,” Herod says, “Let me know. I’d like to see this child for myself.”

I wonder if our pilgrims felt deflated. “We have come all this way, we’re almost here, and the powers of this world are already threatening the king we seek.”

But they looked to the star. For under bright stars, there is the promise of a prosperous future. They left Jerusalem for the final leg to Bethlehem.

The star led them to a humble home in an ordinary part of the city. Inside they found an ordinary couple, with an extraordinary child. All it once it hit them: God's realm will not look like Rome's. God will dwell among the people, people who live in ordinary places and do ordinary things. And God will come into the world with all the innocence and humility of a child. And even better, God's presence will be recognized, not by the high and mighty, not by the religious establishment, not by the people we most expect, but rather, by those we don't expect: a barren cousin named Elizabeth, grungy shepherds, two old custodians named Anna and Simeon, and a rag-tag band of Gentile star-trekkers. God dwells among all peoples, in all places, and is recognizable to all those who seek God's presence with open hearts and open minds. For under a bright star there is the promise of a prosperous future: Emmanuel: God with us!!!

When they had seen the child, our pilgrims opted to go home another way. Unfortunately, Matthew's gospel offers no account of the journey home. No doubt, this journey was a mix of joy and anxiety. God's advent is not always welcome news to the powers of this world. Our pilgrims, much like the disciples that followed Christ, and indeed all disciples who follow Christ, will find a fullness in this epiphany. But this epiphany may also bring danger and discomfort – those who enjoy the privileges of the status quo are often hesitant to give them up. A poem by Mary Lou Kownacki illustrates the duality of Epiphany's joy and challenge:

It is both a joyful and arduous journey. Sometimes the star shines brightly, the promise seems certain, and the pilgrims can sing:
How beautiful are the feet of those who bring God's peace."
Often the star disappears, clouded over, hidden from view, the pilgrims grope blindly, grow discouraged, get weary, give thought to settling down, to forgetting the promise of peace.

One thing is certain: All pilgrims need nourishment to sustain the journey. An occasional oasis for the spirit is essential, a time to feast on the refreshing waters, the rich food of the spirit, in order to get strength to continue the pilgrimage through darkness, star-shine or not.

Sardis Baptist Church, today is a day to hear once more the good news of Epiphany: God is here. Now. For everyone. In the year ahead, our community will seek to follow a bright star, in the hopes of making God's presence known near and far. In good days and bad, may this community always be an oasis, where together, star-shine or not, we can proclaim:

O Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!

Amen.