

“Intention”
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV
 January 7, 2018

Matthew 2: 1 – 12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

How did they know?

It’s a question that I’ve always had, that I still have, and maybe you have, too, about the wise men. How did they know?

They saw the star, and knew they needed to follow it. They knew that they had seen Jesus’ star at its rising, and that they had to follow it.

How did they know?

As I’ve considered this I’ve been reminded that we have always looked to the stars for help.

Some 60,000 years ago the Pacific Islands were settled, not accidentally, but intentionally, precisely, by using the stars and the wind and the waves.¹ Using techniques shown, more recently, by Moana, they’re called Wave Listeners, or Wave Pilots.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/magazine/the-secrets-of-the-wave-pilots.html>

Slaves who were able to escape used the North Star, a part of the constellation they called the drinking gourd, to lead them to freedom.²

Between 1959 and 1975 part of mandatory training for astronauts was going to the Morehead Planetarium at the University of North Carolina to learn celestial navigation so they could pilot their craft even if the navigation systems failed.³

The Naval Academy still requires potential officers to learn how to navigate using a sextant at the stars⁴

And therein is part of the answer for my question. How did they know? The three kings, the wise men, their families and their traveling companions didn't just look up and see a star and know what it meant. They were astrologers. The term magi can refer to many things, but most scholars think that they were those who studied the stars. Studied the stars. To learn from them. See in the movement of the stars something of themselves. Predecessors of our modern-day astronomers.⁵

They studied.

Listening to the waves takes time. Like astronauts. Like naval officers. Like people whose freedom depend on it.⁶

The wise men didn't wake up one morning and know, they made themselves ready. How do we know?

How do we know where we are supposed to be or which path we are to follow?

How do we know when we can be more effective working within the system or when the injustice is so much we need to take to the streets?

² <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/shows/list/underground-railroad/stories-freedom/underground-railroad-terminology/>

³ <http://moreheadplanetarium.org/about/history>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/02/17/why-naval-academy-students-are-learning-to-sail-by-the-stars-for-the-first-time-in-a-decade/?utm_term=.4d81f722402e

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/13/after-two-decades-sailing-by-the-stars-is-back-at-the-naval-academy/>

⁵ Brown, Raymond Edward. "Meaning of the magi: the significance of the star." *Worship* 49, no. 10 (December 1975): 574-582. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed January 6, 2018).

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=g3097>

⁶ <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/Pacific-%E2%80%98wave-pilot%E2%80%99-passes-on-ancient-skills-to-next-generation/article17047911.ece>

When do you do more damage to God's vision for the world by causing a scene and when do you do more good by looking into the heart of the problem?

Where do you get the sustenance you need to look forward, and see possibility?
See hope?

How do we make ourselves open to the stars God places in front of us so that we can be like the Wise Men, whose journey echoed the journey of Moses, and go where we are led?
To the place where God abides?

It's worth remembering, and saying, that this doesn't just happen in here. And it doesn't just happen in ways we expect. My colleague Heather Shortlidge reminds us, "Jesus is discovered through the binding together of pagan astrological signs and Jewish biblical promises. How often do we close ourselves off to the divine mystery that pervades and pushes through our lives because it comes packaged in some unchurchy manner?"

In just a few moments, I'll pass star cards. On these cards is a word. You don't have to take the first word you choose, but don't look for a word you like, because you won't know what this star has to teach you until you get to know it.

Star words aren't the only way, but it is one way to learn to follow the stars God sends. My facebook pages have been a flurry with star word reflections in recent weeks.

"One woman... received JOY last year. Her middle name is JOY. She admits, though, that she had lost her JOY, forgotten how to live with JOY. The star word reminded her throughout the year about the gift of JOY in all circumstances of life; a JOY that comes from the simple affirmation that we belong to God. Another told the story of a woman who received COURAGE. She was in the midst of cancer treatments when this word was given to her. She took that paper star with her to every doctor appointment. She kept the word by her side as she entered hospice care and as she passed from this life to the next."⁷

One woman drew the word pregnant. She and her husband laughed and laughed. And then, 11 months later, they welcomed their third child.

Sometimes the words give us trouble. A man didn't know what to think about healing until he was diagnosed with diabetes later in the year. A college student got assurance, which helped her remember God's love and the love of her congregation during a year where she was far from home and dealing with illness in her family.⁸

And there is the story shared by Peggy Grant. The word she received was: "Compassion." She writes:

⁷ <http://pres-outlook.org/2016/01/star-words-a-spiritual-practice-for-epiphany/>

⁸ <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/01/words-from-the-spirit/>

I thought, “God wants me to become more compassionate.” I set about praying for compassion with this in mind....

At some point during the year, though, I realized that something else was going on. Primarily, this happened through some tremendous examples of compassion that people demonstrated toward me. One Sunday after worshipping here at North I was overcome with emotion and feelings of intense sorrow, grief and loss. I went to the chapel, closed the door, and wept as I had never wept before....

After a long time, I regained enough composure to open the chapel door. And there was Cheryl, holding the flowers she had purchased for our worship that day, in honor of her mother... she handed them to me – sensing I needed them more.... Compassion is not just feeling sorry for someone, but feeling another’s sorrow on such a deep level that one is strongly motivated to try to alleviate the other’s suffering. Cheryl gave me compassion along with the flowers that day.

Gradually I began to realize that Jesus was offering me compassion. As important as it was for me to learn compassion toward others, his intention was to burn through the emotional barriers I had erected, over many years, by offering his compassionate love for me in my emotional distress. This was not the gift I had wanted or prayed for. But I kept trying [until this word compassion blessed me].

Some say that it is more blessed to give than to receive..... I maintain that it is more difficult to receive than to give. In order to receive Jesus’s compassion, we must become vulnerable....admit our neediness and face our darkness... trusting Jesus to wash my emotional scars with his miraculous love.⁹

What word will you receive and what will it mean to you? I cannot say, but I invite you to take this journey in order that you can take other journeys God has in store for you. Let us do so remembering that the star was never the point, the star was the sign.

As Bishop Curry, the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church tweeted last week, “When the three kings returned home without informing Herod of Jesus’ location, they were no longer following the star-- they were following the God who created the stars.”¹⁰

And that is the goal for all of us. For the elders who will be ordained and installed in a few moments. The bread and the cup we will share at this table.

Led by a star, that we might follow the God of all creation, the Christ of all love, the Spirit of justice and truth. Alleluia. Amen.

⁹ <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/08/star-word-surprising-vulnerable-gift-compassion/>



PB Michael Curry
@PB_Curry

Follow

When the three kings returned home without informing Herod of Jesus’ location, they were no longer following the star-- they were following the God who created the stars.

#Episcopal #Epiphany

5:01 PM - 3 Jan 2018