

**Matthew 2:1-16** <sup>1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, “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.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> ‘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.’” <sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the Magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then 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.” <sup>9</sup> When 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> On 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. <sup>13</sup> Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup> So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” <sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the Magi.

Matthew 2:1-16

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“Drawn to the Light”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Over the years, Brad and I have sort of perfected the art of letting the dogs out for their final time each evening. On a rainy fall night or a cold, blustery, snowy winter’s eve, the door is barely cracked open and the poor dogs are shoved out into the elements to do their business in a most efficient manner, thus reducing our heat loss. The big one, Gus, will go bounding out even into a blizzard, but the little one, Bella, has to be sort of tossed out there whether she likes it or not. But it might surprise you to know that in the spring and summer, they are likewise shoved out through a cracked door for the final time each night, lest any of the vast array of winged creatures who, drawn by our porch light, have settled onto our white screen door to bask in the glow make up their minds to foray into our home. Brad and I are generally hospitable people, but I will admit with all honesty that moths, June bugs, flies, and mosquitos are not welcome further than our back door. Just what it is about light that draws these creatures to our entryway is beyond my scientific understanding. But there is a scientific name for it. It’s called Phototaxis. All sorts of living things are phototactic—plants, plankton, insects, and animals. Many are positively phototactic—that means they’re drawn to light. It’s not just bugs. Leaves reach upward for light and change colors when they sense the days beginning to shorten. Plants in front of window will grow towards the light streaming in through the glass. Birds and butterflies follow the light, which is how they know when it’s time to head south each fall. Other things are negatively phototactic—meaning that they flee from light. Cockroaches, rats, mice, owls, possums, and several deep sea creatures flourish in the dark and scatter into hiding when lights come on.

Humans, it turns out, are positively phototactic as well. Over the centuries, we've come to associate light with warmth, safety, and protection. Physiologically, we need light to stay healthy. The development of full-spectrum lamps has been scientifically proven to have positive impact on the physical and mental health of individuals who suffer from illnesses like Seasonal Affect Disorder.

But the question we humans have long struggled to answer is whether or not we are positively phototactic spiritually and morally. Are our souls inherently drawn to the light of God? In our scripture lesson this morning, we meet a group of people who absolutely believed that our spirits are drawn to light. We begin 2021 with Magi from the east, searching for the savior; the King of the Jews. We begin this year as we begin every new year—with a call to the light and a search for the divine.

We don't know very much about these Magi who came searching for God. Scripture tells us precious little. We know they came from the east, which isn't saying much. 'East' could include anything from modern day Russia, Mongolia, China, India, or Middle-Eastern countries like Iran and Afghanistan.

We also know they weren't the most politically astute fellows to have ever lived—at least, not when it came to Jewish politics of the era. To be fair, they weren't Jews and wouldn't have known much about the culture or history, so we can't judge them too harshly. They just assumed that a baby king would be born in the capital city, in the home of the current king.

They may have known that "...Herod had been appointed "King of the Jews" by the Roman senate in 40 BCE. But they couldn't have known that while the Romans considered Herod's heritage qualification enough to be a 'Jewish' king, the Jews of Jerusalem had a hard time accepting his legitimacy. Herod's father was an Edomite, an indigenous population that generations before had been forcibly converted to Judaism by the Israelites. Herod's mother was from Arabia (see Josephus, War, 1:181). This tenuous Jewish identity more than primed the pump of Herod's paranoia when he heard the inquiries being made about a newborn 'king of the Jews' by the Magi from the East." [adapted slightly from Exegesis before "The God of Another Way" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

We know they weren't kings, no matter what the popular hymn may have us sing. They were Magi. That title, in and of itself, can tell us a great deal about them, because there are several words in the English language that share the same root meaning as Magi.

One of those words is 'magistrate'. In all probability, they were local officials—although probably related to the royal family in some way. They were extremely well educated. Their job was to monitor the world around them so as to protect the people of the immediate vicinity. They were geologists, meteorologists, and agriculturalists, among other things.

Another related word in English is 'magic'. They were astrologers, possibly Zoroastrians, and they kept their eyes glued to the skies because that was the realm of the divine. The sky is the source from which answers and information would come. They were theologians, who understood light in the sky to be the medium with which the divine communicated to humankind.

Another related word is 'imagine'. They were inventors, thinkers, dreamers. The 'Star of Wonder' caught their attention. While others might have looked up at unusual phenomena in the heavens with fear and foreboding, these men would have been intrigued and fascinated. They were drawn to the light because they knew it meant something big was happening.

What fascinates me is that they come seeking the King of the Jews, even though they're not Jewish. I can only deduce that a hodgepodge of assumptions in their experience, education, beliefs, and studies led them to believe this was not an ordinary king or an ordinary birth—that this King of the Jews was not only new and promising and indicative of great possibilities, but that he was somehow relevant to their lives. Given that they understood stars to be communication from the divine, they were obviously looking for more than a king. They were drawn to the light. They were looking to encounter the divine. They obviously believed that such an encounter must be sought beyond the bounds of the familiar, which, for many, is true. And they obviously believed that, Jewish or not, they were being led and would be permitted to worship him.

Isn't it interesting that King Herod, the leader of the Jewish people, who should have welcomed God's Messiah, instead saw him only as a threat? Isn't it interesting that the Magi traveled hundreds of miles to follow a star, but the religious leaders of the day didn't even make the 2-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to check out the Magi's story? Herod saw only power and threats to it. The religious establishment saw only what it wanted to see, and in arrogance, assumed that if God acted, it would be through them, and them alone.

So our Magi set out again, following the star until it stopped. When they arrived, they find their king living a simple life, in a peasant village, and they worship him anyway. An onlooker who appealed only to reason and 'conventional wisdom' would say these wise men were crazy men. All of this leads us to an inevitable question: What makes one wise?

As you might suspect, I have an answer. Spiritual Phototaxis. Being drawn to the light, responding to its call within. These men were not wise because of what they knew in their heads, but because of what they knew in their hearts. Herod's scribes and servants had only to travel two miles to find the King of kings. They knew where to go, but they didn't have the heart. But our Magi had some conviction—something in their hearts that lit up their world. They took wisdom to heart.

But even more than that, they took wisdom to go. The promptings of God in their hearts drove them to take action. The Magi made a long journey that forever changed their lives. They put commitment to their conviction. They put feet to their faith. They responded to the draw of the light. They didn't just sit there staring out into the heavens. They weren't sitters, they were seekers. Make no mistake about it. These men faced enormous obstacles. There was a culture barrier, a distance barrier, a language barrier, a racial barrier, a religious barrier, not to speak of a hostile king and indifferent religious leaders. It couldn't have been easy for them to find Jesus, but they did. They learned from their hearts, and if they did it, then we can too.

They were wise because they gave the very best, despite the situation. I don't know if it was a shock to find Jesus, Mary, and Joseph living the lives of commoners. But they didn't let it stop them. They offered gold for a king. Frankincense for a god. And myrrh, an embalming agent, for one who was bound to die. What I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall when they get there. Were Mary and Joseph shocked, or did they somehow expect such things? I'm inclined towards the former, but Matthew doesn't tell us. The more important question we face is this: what is our best?

"Renoir, the French artist, was afflicted with acute rheumatism, and suffered most of his life with the incurable malady. For many years he was forced to paint while sitting in a chair. A friend noticed one day that the artist was forcing himself to paint, through almost blinding pain. "You have painted enough," said the friend, "You are established as one of the top artists of France and Europe. Why must you go on, torturing yourself like this?" Renoir hardly looked up at him from his canvas and said, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains." [from 'When you follow a Star and Find A Stable' by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I hope that's true. 2020 has been a painful year for many – a year of loss, grief, and fear. But maybe the beauty does remain – the beauty of remembering what is most important: to treasure relationships, to value sacrifice and those who subjugated the needs of the self in order to attend to the needs of the many, to find in time spent at home a new, quieter routine that allowed us to think, breathe, meditate, and re-learn the rhythm of life.

Scripture tells us that they left by another road because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Not only did they follow their hearts and give of their best despite circumstances, but they adapted and changed in order to accommodate a new reality in their lives. When we come face to face with the King of kings, we are different. Our road must change, primarily because we give up control of the direction and turn it over to one with a bigger vision for us. We give ourselves to the light.

Now, as I mentioned early on: one of the questions we humans have long struggled to answer is whether or not we are positively phototactic spiritually and morally. Are our souls inherently drawn to the light of God? The light of love? The light of justice? Clearly, the Magi believed we are. The Rev.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also seemed to think so. He wrote, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” He believed that human beings are, with time, drawn to correct wrongs and do right by one another. I’m inclined to agree, but I reach that conclusion purely on faith. In my experience, I will confess to having met some people who are so in love with perpetuating hate and evil, and other so bent on remaining ignorant and so threatened by change that it makes it hard to stay positive sometimes. Moreover, I am prepared to admit that even the Biblical record is somewhat mixed. In places, we are commended for letting our light shine and empowered to be God’s image-bearers, sharing his light with the world (Matthew 5:12, Isaiah 60:1, Genesis 1:26). But elsewhere in scripture, we are judged with this indictment: Light came into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light (John 3:20).

One of the oldest and most profound theological arguments that all of Christendom has wrestled with for centuries is whether or not humans are fundamentally evil or fundamentally good. Are we drawn to light or to darkness? To me, that seems like a false dichotomy. The existential human condition is that we are both. We are sinner and saint. We are capable of great good and great evil. We may be agents of peace and goodwill in one moment, and agents of destruction and hate the next.

So are we positively phototactic when it comes to the human spirit and human morality? Are we intrinsically, inherently, compellingly drawn to the light? Well, funny thing—God seems to think so. God seems to see the very best in us—all that we are capable of becoming. God believes great things of us. When God looked at Abraham, he saw more than a coward, he saw a dedicated servant. When God looked at Moses, he saw more than a murderer, he saw a prophet. When God looked at David, he saw more than an adulterer, he saw a leader. When God looked at Peter, he saw more than one who denied Christ, he saw one who build Christ’s Church. When God looked at Paul, he saw more than a persecutor and a tyrant, he saw an evangelist and theologian. And when he looks at us, he saw far more than the sins we think confine us as moral failures. He sees possibility and promise. He sees the light in us. And his grace is calling to us. Even before we know it, it’s prompting us within all the time to rise above the dark and zero in on the light. God believes we’re meant for light. God believes we’ll be drawn to it. God always believes in us, even when it makes no sense. God is truly an eternal optimist. Maybe that’s because God already knows how this will all end—God knows that light triumphs over darkness and that good will carry the day when all is said and done. So we begin 2021 with a call to the light and a search for the divine. Everything I’m reading says that 2021 may be every bit as difficult as 2020. That the rollout of a vaccine around the world is a logistical feat we’ve never attempted, and public confidence in the vaccines is tenuous. I get that. But the very fact that we search speaks to me of the human capacity to look for the light and the hope. And the fact that we celebrate each New Year with fireworks, resolving to improve ourselves and our world, looking ahead to better days, speaks to the human hunger for renewal and restoration. We place ourselves in the caravan of the Magi who went before us, following the star of hope, drawn to the light, daring to imagine great things. We place our trust in the God who lights our way with wisdom and love, who believes the very best of you and me, who is present in the darkest moments of our life, and who calls us to join him in working for an ever-brighter world in this new year. May it be so. Amen.