

“Draw Near to the Star”  
Matthew 2:1-12

One of the most difficult challenges that has faced us during this pandemic is how our social circles have shrunk and how we are spending more time alone and in isolation. Even our Christmas celebrations this year were toned down and many of us spent Christmas alone. Our world became small and with that, there is a tendency for our sense of the vastness of life to shrink. This feeds our illusion of being separate from others and from God. Nature has been a great source of healing of that sense of disconnect. Looking at a beautiful sunset, enjoying the beauty of winter, or observing a bird in a tree have taken on new importance for our sense of connection. And so today, I want to remind you of how grand our connection is to all of life.

In their book *Living With the Stars: How the Human Body Is Connected to the Life Cycles of the Earth, the Planets, and the Stars*, Karel and Iris Schrijver explore how everything that 'is' us comes from the debris of exploding stars. Everything on our planet is composed of the debris of exploding stars. The building blocks of our human bodies are the remnants of stars...we are stardust. This is a continual process. Karel and Iris write that 40,000 tons of stardust continue to rain down on planet earth every year. When stars go supernova they create the elements of the periodic table, including those that make up the human body. Planetary scientist and stardust expert Dr. Ashley King explains. “It is totally 100% true: nearly all the elements in the human body were made in a star and many have come through several supernovas.” <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/are-we-really-made-of-stardust.html%20Downloaded%20January%204>

It is no wonder that throughout our human history, we have been fascinated by the stars. On the one hand, they are far away, mysterious and beyond our reach. On the other hand, they are a part of us. In some ways, we know that we are connected to the stars and to all there is and yet, we often forget that connection. And so we retell the old stories of faith and keep them alive before us so that they remind us of the vastness of life, especially in times of hardships.

Today we retell the story of the Magi and their visit to the Christ child. Interestingly enough, they followed a star to find their way to Jesus. Yet, because of their cultural expectations, they thought that the star was leading them to the palace of a king. It was the logical thing to do. If they were to find a new leader, the place where most people would have expected to find a new leader would have been the palace of royalty. But Herod's palace was the last place God was bringing a new era of salvation to the world. Herod ruled for 37 years. At the time of the birth of Jesus, he was towards the end of his life and was even more suspicious of any threat to his power. Herod had executed three of his sons when he believed they were a threat to his rule. Herod had ten wives, one of which was executed on his orders. Herod claimed to be the king of the Jews even though he was not officially a king. He was a ruler appointed by Rome. Herod tortured people, imposed backbreaking taxes, and disregarded the religious and national hopes of the people. His rule was known as a rule of terror. He was one of those lost souls in the world

who completely forgot about his connection to God, to others, and to the stars. His palace was the heart of the darkness of that age. Yet, this was the place the Magi assumed they would find the special leader.

So, when the Magi visited him and shared with him their search for a newborn king of Israel, we can only imagine what went through his mind. These wise men from the east came looking for a new king while Herod wanted to be the only true king of Israel. They had the audacity to tell Herod that they saw a star which they followed to find this special king. Even though these men were most likely not Jewish, Herod took their words of prophecy seriously. He was frightened and even all the city of Jerusalem was frightened. But Herod played along and asked them to come back to him once they found this child in order to learn about him and worship him. What Herod wanted was to learn about the child and eliminate him as a potential threat. He was ready to work with anyone and in any possible way to eliminate the threat of losing his power.

What is interesting in this story of course is the amazing role of the Magi. Even though we are not told much about them in our Bible story, they play a critical role. We are not told how many of them there were. We are not told their names or country of origin. We are not told how they happened upon their wisdom to seek the child. But what we are told is that they played an essential role in protecting Jesus from Herod. After receiving a vision of the harm which Herod was intending for Jesus, the Magi decided to go home by another way, a road less travelled! Even though they risked their own safety, the Magi found a way to resist the dangerous and violent powers of Herod.

The wisdom that these visitors from the east had was that of the stars and of dreams. They were adept at listening to God through logic, but also through mystery. They knew the facts of life, but they also knew about the power of the mysteries of life. To them, life in the here and now was connected to the ancient prophecies and to the nudges of stars and dreams. They protected the Christ child from the violence of the world because they listened to the nudge of the Spirit in their hearts. They could have easily dismissed the message as a crazy dream, but because they were adept at paying attention to mystery, they discerned the right thing to do. This is the challenge for us today as we continue to navigate our way through a pandemic that has filled our world with pain, fear, and isolation, we are invited to listen with our hearts and to lean into the mysteries of life and of faith.

This reminded me of a children's story called *The Message of the Birds* by Kate Westerlund. It is about how the birds and the children found a way to retell the Christmas story so that it would be heard. In a world that amplifies violence and fear, the birds found a way to amplify the news of joy, connection, and love.

"The old owl began a story he had told many times over the years. 'Long ago in a simple stable, a child was born. And as he lay, the animals of the stable tenderly watched. And there were birds in the rafters listening to the gentle cooing and gurgling of the baby. But what they heard in his voice were the words of a song that they would carry throughout the world...It was a special song of blessing, of joy, and good will.' 'Why don't we sing it

anymore?’ asked the robin. ‘People don’t listen,’ said the partridge. ‘Why not?’ asked the cuckoo. ‘Perhaps it is the language they no longer understand,’ said a lark. ‘But if they listened with their hearts,’ suggested the little robin, ‘hearts understand every language, don’t they?’

‘Some people think the message is for others and is not meant for them,’ said the owl. “I think many have had their ears closed for so long they don’t remember how to listen,’ said the hoopoe. “The children...’ said the robin softly.

‘We should sing it for the children,’ he continued. ‘They would listen and they would understand the message!’

For a moment there was not a sound and then suddenly the branches were alive with twittering, and chirping and every kind of bird sound.

They all agreed. ‘Tell every bird you see,’ the owl said. ‘Tell them wherever they fly, to whisper the message; sing it softly to every child.’

The birds flew in every direction. Some had long journeys, but wherever they flew, they sang and whispered to bird after bird...and to child after child. Then one night it was time. A big, bright, beautiful star shone down over the earth. A child came with a little lantern and reached out to hold the hand of another. She held the hand of her brother; and he reached for the hand of a friend. People came with candles, lights, and torches to see what was happening. They saw hands linked together ---white hands, brown hands, black hands. Children everywhere were joining together. The children had heard the message of the birds, and what had started as a whisper now resounded from shining faces all over the world. For, you see, hearts do understand every language - ‘Hear us, hear the message...’ Let there be peace on Earth!” Amen.