

Under the Stars
January 6, 2019: The Feast of the Epiphany
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[Isaiah 60:1-6](#); [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

And there, ahead of them, went the star that the kings had seen at its rising, and it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.
- Matthew 2:9-10

Here, today, we are under the stars again. From the beginning of Advent through our glorious Christmas and to this very day, Epiphany, it is as if we have been walking together under a clear(ish) night sky. We have been walking side by side, one foot in front of the other; being careful of a stray branch on the ground here, a rustle in the bushes there, mostly just glad not to have to walk through the dark alone; and our gaze has been upward, as much as it can be, as we've been looking for God--waiting for God, *more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning* (Psalm 130:6)--as the stars shift over our heads.

Today, of course, we remember through story and song, flowers and branches, that one time when three wise guys (or kings or whoever they were) noticed a new star being born. "Amazing!" they cried, and they knew what they had to do: they followed it, step after step after step after step, until it stopped. Given other historical clues in the Gospel, mainly about King Herod and his governance, it would appear that this journey took about two years. That's how far they traveled. No wonder that when the star stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy!

I don't know about you, but I don't usually get my bearings by the night sky. I proudly can spot the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt and a few other clusters and shapes whose names I can never remember--but other than that, I don't know what I'm looking at, much less how to *follow* a star, night after night, day after day. Yet, just like I do often get my bearings by looking at the buildings downtown--oh, there's the Guardian, there's the Penobscot, there's the Fisher, there's the RenCen--to know where I am and where I'm headed, the stars were their map of the holy, their map by night.

"We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars," writes Jack Gilbert in one of his poems.¹ I see his point; we must de-program ourselves of expectations and routines in order to see, absorb, and be enchanted by the raw beauty emerging where we least expect it. I also believe that sometimes, we need to learn the constellations. That is, we need to pause long enough to consider the shapes and patterns and stories among us, and take comfort in them, even. Constellations, for our brothers and sisters, have been patterns in the sky--not only patterns, but roads, well-worn paths, that our ancestors *all over the world* have taken; humble and creative grooves in how we, together, "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

So this week I've been thinking a lot about how we do get our bearings, if not (always) by the night sky. How do we understand where we are and where we are compelled to be? How are we going on adventures, adventures for the long haul? How are we crossing boundaries to meet Christ in one another, in the unfamiliar? How did it feel to pray, "Visit our rest with disturbing dreams, and our journeys with strange companions?" What came to mind when we prayed together, "Grace us with the hospitality to open our hearts and homes to visitors filled with unfamiliar wisdom and bearing profound

¹ "Tear It Down", 2001, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/tear-it-down>

and unusual gifts”?² I wonder if the magi themselves had some of the same thoughts: here they were, having followed a star diligently, relentlessly, some may have said foolishly, *for years*, to find a child in a far off land, who - and whose family - were speaking a foreign language and were of humble and modest means. They must have been thinking, “Where are we, and what does this mean?”

Yet, they crossed through the door of the house and opened themselves and their chests of treasures to honor this unfamiliar one before them. The theologian Christena Cleveland says that sure, people can *meet* God within our own cultural context--but she distinguishes meeting God from following God. Following God step by step, day after day, night after night, means crossing “into other cultures because that’s what Jesus did in the incarnation”³ and that is what the magi are up to as well.

Christena talks of a friend she made one summer as they were interning together at the same organization in Boston.⁴ They ate lunch together, enjoyed their conversations, became fond of each other. Christena writes that even though she’d mentioned on most days her walk with Jesus, one day at the end of the summer, the friend cried out (I guess you could say he’d had an “epiphany”), “Wait, what, you’re Christian?! No, that can’t be. You’re smart and kind and open-minded. Everyone knows, Christena, that Christians are ‘judgmental, ignorant, dogmatic, and anti-intellectual’ and you are none of those things; therefore you cannot be Christian! Christians,” he continued, “exclude others. They don’t spend time with people who are not like them. You can’t possibly be Christian, Christena! I don’t believe it. Take it back!”

This conversation drove Christena, who is also a social psychologist, to examine how we Christians *are* we each other: how we act, yes, but moreover what’s going on in our internal worlds, such that we naturally, humanly, gravitate toward what is familiar. We take comfort in worlds and in creating worlds wherein people act like we do, maybe people look like we do, dress like we do, read the same newspapers or online sources as we do, shop at the same stores as we do, how all of this feels so comfortable to us. Yet, in this comfort, we are not where we are called to be. Christena confesses right at the beginning of her book [paraphrased], “Even though I’m from a multi-racial, multi-ethnic family - and even church - I still am guided internally by a sense of Right Christian and Wrong Christian.” And that she is a “right Christian” and others, simply because they’re from different worldviews and contexts and are unfamiliar, are “wrong Christians”. And yet, a new star is before us all. A new star beckons us to be guided by a different truth. A new star compels us forward into the unknown and the unfamiliar. Indeed, Christena continues, ““When we meet Jesus around people who are just like us and then continue to follow Jesus with people who are just like us, we stifle our growth in Christ and open ourselves up to worlds of division.”⁵

Under the night sky, yet again; under these stars, where we can’t help but welcome with relief our smallness in the universe and take heart in God’s vastness, I wonder how small, or how big, are our worlds. Might we dare to follow - day by day, step by step, night after night - a new star to meet and honor Christ?

² The Collect of the Day was “Radiant Morning Star, you are both guidance and mystery. Visit our rest with disturbing dreams, and our journeys with strange companions. Grace us with the hospitality to open our hearts and homes to visitors filled with unfamiliar wisdom bearing profound and unusual gifts” from the Vanderbilt Revised Common Lectionary resource, <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=106>

³ *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*, p. 21

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21