

# “Star Light, Star Bright”

December 27, 2009  
The First Sunday after Christmas

Exodus 13:17-22  
Matthew 2:1-12

“<sup>21</sup>The LORD went in front of [the Israelites] in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light.”

Ex. 13:21

“ ... and [the wise men from the East] 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.

Matt. 2:9

*It is the story that lights the way ...*

In the poetic imagination of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,

*Three Kings came riding from far away,  
Melchior and Caspar and Balthazar;  
Three Wise Men out of the East were they,  
And they traveled by night and they slept by day,  
For their guide was a beautiful, wonderful star.*

*Three caskets they bore on their saddle-bows,  
Three caskets of gold with golden keys;  
Their robes were of crimson silk with rows  
Of bells and pomegranates and furbelows,  
Their turbans like blossoming almond-trees.*

*And so the Three Kings rode into the West,  
Through the dusk of the night, over hill and dell,  
And sometimes they nodded with beard on breast,  
And sometimes talked, as they paused to rest,  
With the people they met at some wayside well.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
“THE THREE KINGS”

**What do you suppose they talked about, those three kings “as they paused to rest?”** Did they share the purpose of their quest with those folks “they met at some wayside well?” Did they point to that bright star in the western sky? “*Haven’t you noticed it?*” they would have asked. It’s a question I would have asked, were I one of them. I bet you would have too, had you been one of the three!

Such celestial phenomena were attention getters in those days, when stars and constellations were the guiding lights for travelers -- and for decision-makers. It had to have been a topic of conversations as those magi rested at a desert oasis – most likely in the presence of other travelers. “How long have you been traveling?” “Where do you think that star will take you?” “How long do you intend to follow it?”

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**These “Three Kings of Orient Are” the stuff of metaphor and imagination.**

Three *GENTILE SEEKERS* who “stand in” for all of us upon whom the light of Christ has shown – the gospel proclaimed and manifested beyond Israel to all the world. Three *JOURNEYMEN*, whose quest resonates with my own story, very likely with yours, for I would bet that their story connects with yours as well: An arresting sign for some; a guiding light for others; a journey of faith and trust for so many.

For me the story of these three kings bearing gifts resides in my earliest memories as I find myself well before school age dressed in a bathrobe wearing an impressively painted cardboard crown (with “real jewels” at the points, I was told) – intently focusing on a brightly lit star - and carrying a gift for the baby Jesus. That short journey down the center aisle of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church is the **structural metaphor of my life** as the end of one segment became the beginning of another.

Now and again in my journey of faith, new insights and experiences that can only be attributed to God’s providence would alter the course of it: questions and curiosities of faith demanding attention - and with each a wrestling, a leading to a new oasis of insight in into God’s way with us.

**This morning’s text is just such an oasis.** Three well educated men, bringing not only gifts for a ‘new born king’ but within themselves an entirely foreign set of cultural and religious mores follow a cosmic sign to a cattle stall, where this ‘King’ they expected to honor lies wrapped in swaddling cloth is lying in a manger. And as the goal of their quest lay before them “*in such mean estate,*” their journey takes an unforeseen turn. One can only imagine how it affected their lives.

- Their preconceived assumptions challenged – the King of the Jews, lying in a manger?
- An experience so moving they return home by “another way” – carrying a new understanding of the world and the way God operates in it.
- Their response a direct challenge to the status quo – in a precursor of this infant’s life they risk offending the political power of a reigning monarch.

In my imagination Wadsworth Longfellow might have brought his poem to completion this way:

*And so the Three Kings rode back to the East,  
Into the day and through the dark night,  
And sometimes they slept astride their beasts,  
But mostly they talked 'bout what their eyes did feast,  
and of that babe and that star so bright.*

**Star Light, Star Bright, first star I see ....**” Allow that Natal Star to stand in your life as that guiding light standing ready to challenges your preconceived assumptions, whatever they are. Allow the Star of Bethlehem to shine its light on those first few steps in a new portion of your journey of faith, just as it surely did for Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar ... and countless seekers since.

### **WE ALL ENTER *THE STORY* WITH *OUR STORY***

**When my dad was in his early sixties he began writing his memoirs.** “*Writing,*” may not be the best term for it. And “*memoirs*” might be an inadequate description. It was really an *oral history* – everything my dad could remember from his childhood (in the early 1920s) to the present. Over the course of ten years or so, he recorded a chronology of remembrances on 22 audio cassettes. Over the last few years I had them transcribed into digital and printable documents. A dozen years after his death the project was complete – a 200 page document I titled *The Life and Times of Joe L. Vance*. The audio cassettes have been converted into DVD’s for posterity!

**There is much in his story of which I was familiar ... I was, after all, a part of at least two thirds of it!** But there was a good bit that I did not know, and certainly I had never “put the whole story” together, as it were. My dad was a master of the personal anecdote. But when ordered into a narrative I was made aware of two powerful insights:

The first was *the character shaping role of the Great Depression and World War Two in the lives of my parents*. It’s not that I did not already know that, but what my dad’s narrative brought into full focus was how those two events shaped the ethos of my parents: their personalities and the way they understood and lived in the world around them.

The second is the recognition that *I was born into their story*. It should have been obvious to me. “Well of course you were born into their story, you are their child; raised in their home; taught at their knees!” Yes, that’s true. But until I had my dad’s collected reminiscences – from as far back as he could remember – in my hands, I never realized how much of my story is an extended adaptation of their story.

**You and I did not choose the families into which we were born any more that did Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar.** We had nothing to do with the family histories into which entered, and of which we became a part. Each of us entered into a family complex and a community in which certain patterns, assumptions, beliefs, roles and expectations were already in place.

When you and I took our first breath, there was already in place -- in the homes that became ours -- a very subjective view of the world; a particular place, or lack of place, for religion (a particular expression of the faith of the family); an ongoing explanatory narrative spoken or assumed that provided the boundaries of a world out of which you and I first began to make sense of what was happening and our place in it all.

You and I were born into a particular culture in which almost every role and place we can imagine already had its script: by gender, by ancestry, by race, by position and by opportunity or by lack of both.

**We were, in short, born into a pre-existing story.** Just like those three journeying wise men. When they packed for their journey to find that to which the star pointed they carried more than just their gifts and their overnight bags. They carried with them their own narrative – one that was about to be altered in ways they could hardly imagine.

### **THE POWERFUL ROLE OF NARRATIVE**

**In a recent article, columnist David Brooks captures it quite well when he wrote, “We are all born late.”**

*“We’re born into history that is well under way. We’re born into cultures, nations and languages that we didn’t choose.”*

*[And it is] the stories we select [as we grow] that help us interpret the world. They guide us to pay attention to certain things and ignore other things. They lead us to see certain things as sacred .... They are the frameworks that shape our desires and goals. The most important power we have is the power to help select the [story which becomes the] lens through which we see reality.*

The world of “three Wise Men following a star” has turned over many times. From their perspective the world was quite flat geographically – the horizon stretched out before them without end. People in that day took very seriously the awesome interplay of the divine and the human. That star meant something.

**Today, our world is flatter still.** There was a time, when we took the story of faith into which we were born and carried it forth, from generation to generation with little

change – in large part because we were not exposed to other ideas, other thoughts, other religions. One was born into a Christian home, remained a Christian throughout life and passed that faith onto children and grandchildren who in turn passed it on to their children and grandchildren. It was not necessary to explain the faith; or defend the faith; or even study the faith. It was a given.

But things have changed. Wade Clark Roof, in his book *“Spiritual Marketplace”* points to a fairly recent phenomenon:

*“At this juncture in history, inherited religious traditions face severe challenges. Religious truths that were once closely linked to place and context are undermined by geographic and social mobility.*

*“The result,” Roof writes, “is a proliferation of religious scripts, greater selectivity of practices from a variety of sources, the possibility of multilayered religious worlds, and a consequent softening of personal commitment.*

One would have to be a Rip Van Winkle, asleep for the past dozen years, to be blind to the many narratives competing in the world today for hearts and minds. Sadly we see them played out in the culture wars in our own nation; splashed on the tabloids at checkout counters; shattered and splattered on city streets in the Middle East and increasingly around the world; we see a multitude of guiding lights on televised news programs and through media of every stripe and shape - tweeted and texted and flkerd.

And we have come to realize that not all of us are reading from the same script; that not all of us are following the same star that illumined a rude stable bearing the One who we know as the Light of the world; and even among we Christians there are decidedly different perspectives on how one lives the Christian life.

### ***THE STORY THAT BECOMES MY STORY***

**All of which is to say that we Christians of the Presbyterian persuasion have a task before us.** As the inheritors of the Good News of Jesus Christ, of Gospel, of the foundational stories of our faith, of roadmaps for living - we either blithely accept what has been given and assume that it will find its way into the lives of our children and grandchildren, or we can allow the Spirit to use us ... as it did with Three Seekers long ago. We can fit into the prewritten scripts into which we were born, or we can allow the story of Jesus Christ and the mighty acts of God to breathe new life into us – empowering us to take the story further down the road.

This story of astrologers led to the infant Jesus by a guiding star can either remain just that – a sweet story of Christmas– or it can become our story as –

we join the magi kneeling before infant Jesus, and with them return home as changed people!

Aside from our imagination we have no way of knowing what happened to those three. But I do know that their story has become a part of the master narrative of the faith I hold in Jesus Christ. And it has become my story to carry forward in my life, just as it is for you, and for every Christian.

... the story of a divine love so deep and so broad that it would find its beginning in a manger, flourish in Galilee, and come to crisis and completion in Jerusalem; a story of new creation and new possibilities brought about by the reconciling work of this One whose birth we celebrate; this One through whom God was reconciling himself to the created order, and enlisting us into the ministry of reconciliation (see 2 Cor. 5:16-21)

This is the story my parents bequeathed to me through their lives of faith ... and it became my story to carry on ... in my unique way. Someone once said that, “*God has no grandchildren.*” Though such a trite cliché tends to weaken the powerful role God’s eternal love affair with humanity it does mean **that it is for each of us is to take the Gospel and make it our own**; to be drawn by that **Star Light/Star Bright**, into that story in such a way that the Christian narrative becomes the guiding principle in our lives – **to make the Gospel meaningful in our in our day and time.**

We have all been born late – thanks be to God!  
For THAT STORY that is God’s gift to me.  
And thanks be to God THAT STORY has become MY STORY! So ...

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom,  
Lead Thou me on;  
The night is dark, and I am far from home;  
Lead Thou me on.  
Keep Thou my feet;  
I do not ask to see the distant scene  
one step ... one step ...enough for me.*

Cardinal John Henry Newman, 1833

Stephen R. Vance  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Greenville  
South Carolina

RESOURCES:

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John Henry Newman. “Lead Kindly Light.” 1833

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) “The Three Kings”

Wade Clark Roof. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.