

## “Stars that Call Us”

A sermon preached at the First Congregational Church (UCC) of Camden

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Isaiah 60. 1 – 6 & Mt. 2. 1 – 12

From our house, at night, we can see the beautiful star beaming from the top of Mt. Battie. It's a comforting sign, a reminder that this is home. And when our travels have taken us far from Camden during the month of December, we feel a special joy when cresting that hill on Rte. 1, somewhere north of Damariscotta, when you can see the star for the first time.

Of all the stories that have found a special place in our memory, the story we've heard this morning—with the star guiding the magi to Bethlehem—is surely on the list of our “favorites.” And what a story it is! Do you remember the first time you saw it enacted in a Christmas pageant—which you might well have had a part in playing? And I wonder how many times you've heard it—or seen it—since, here in this church or in others?

The story is shaped by the mystery of that star, an astral event guiding these magi, or “wisemen,” from distant lands to Bethlehem. Of course, much of what you remember about them isn't in the single account in the New Testament that remembers them. No, it has been embellished—as all good stories are—over the many centuries since it first appeared in Matthew's Gospel.

Consider the magi, for instance. Many of us know the old carol, “We Three Kings,” a hymn written by John H. Hopkins for a pageant performed at General Theological Seminary in NYC, in 1857.

But where do those “kings” come from? It's a fascinating story: Christians from the Middle Ages onward exchanged the biblical “magi,” those mysterious astrologers who could read the heavens for signs and portents of things to come, for kings—probably an allusion to Psalm 72. 10 – 11, an alternate reading for today: “May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.”

And they gave these three kings names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. And memorialized them with biographies: Caspar came from the kingdom of Asia (or the Arabian Peninsula) and brought frankincense; Melchior was from a distant land in Europe, and he brought gold; and Balthazar, the black king, was from Africa and came bearing myrrh.

The tradition in Hispanic lands and among Hispanic peoples—because it has journeyed with immigrants, as stories and traditions do, to the lands of South and Central and North America—goes by the Spanish name “cabalgata de los reyes,” the “parade of the kings.” Let’s see a version of it, this one from Madrid in 2023. [See video— <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKhsjj58Cv4>]

What a spectacle—perhaps an inspiration for next year’s pageant here at the church! Imagine staging this coming down Elm Street, like the Christmas-by-the-Sea parade, with fire trucks decorated and the kings sitting atop one of the town of Camden’s flatbed trucks, perhaps with a camel or two for company!

On a more modest scale, a version of this tradition has the three kings, dressed in ceremonial garments, going from house to house on the evening before January 6, the so-called “Feast of Epiphany.” They write “CMB” with the year in chalk on the frame above the front door and always come with candy for the children. Perhaps they’ve come to your home, or you’ve seen these letters written on the doorframes of others’ houses.

Now, here’s the point we often miss: the magi—or kings—are not really the center of that story. They’re “bit players,” as it were, on a larger drama, with the star being the heart of it all. But they’re needed as ones who interpret this heavenly sign and make the long journey to Bethlehem. And that is where we get the name for this day, “Epiphany,” a word whose Greek roots mean to “show forth.” In this case, it is the “showing forth” for all the world of Jesus who is to be “a ruler who is to shepherd [God’s] people Israel.” The magi/kings make of this a “global” announcement, representing as they do all the known parts of the Mediterranean world of that day—Europe, Arabia (or Asia) and Africa.

This morning, though, I’d like to consider the role of the star—both in this story and in our stories. In this case, not simply the beam of light that beckoned these astrologers long ago, calling them to journey from their homes to Bethlehem, or the star that beams from the top of Mt. Battie. But the star that has guided you in your life—above all, in dark seasons you’ve faced. The one

that remains steady even when you feel lost in loneliness or grief, in anger or sorrow.

Because this is the star that matters most, just as it was at the center of this ancient story.

A little poem reminds us of this, broadening our vision to remember that this “star” is everywhere around us—and in everything that is. It’s a gem of a poem and one I’ve long treasured, written by the Kentucky poet Wendell Berry. I’d say it is part of the long and rich Epiphany tradition, an embellishing of that ancient story of the magi, a wise marker that can guide us today on our journeys. It goes like this:

The incarnate Word is with us,  
is still speaking, is present  
always, yet leaves no sign  
but everything that is.

[“Sabbaths, 1999,” in *Given. Poems* (2020)]

What a gem of a poem! Some of you will recall that our denomination, the United Church of Christ, had a wildly successful marketing campaign—yes, it’s true: we are that “modern”—called the “Still Speaking Campaign,” initiated in 2002. It went back to a note that Gracie Allen left in her last “love letter” to her husband, George Burns, and it simply read: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” The UCC memorialized this note with the added line: “God is still speaking.”

Now, I don’t know if Wendell Berry knew this, though he might well have. In a way, it doesn’t matter; wisdom is wisdom wherever it’s found. The poem bears a truth that is central to our faith, and a good reminder on this Epiphany: God is not lost in the past, not buried in ancient stories about what happened in places distant to our own. And while the birth of the baby Jesus happened once, the incarnate Word is “with us” here and now, and that Word is “still speaking” and is “present always.”

And here is the startling finale of Berry’s poem: That Word “leaves no sign / but everything that is.” Everything. This is the deepest bedrock of our faith: that God is with us in and with and through *everything*. In our happiest of times, and

in the most terrible; in our seasons of grief and in times of great joy; among our noblest accomplishments and amid our most dismal failures. *Everything*.

Today, then, I invite you to wonder about what “stars” are calling to you. Where are these “stars” in your life, the ones that interrupt those dark times and seasons when you see nothing in the “night sky” of your life? Where do you find the ones that still, even then and there, will beckon you to journey forth? Not on a journey to Bethlehem, but to discover the wonder that God is still speaking, still present among us, always, leav[ing] no sign / but everything that is”? There are there, but you need to gain the eyes to see them. And where are they? *Everywhere*. And yes, as the poet reminds us: *in everything that is*.