

Natalie W. Bell
January 3, 2021

2021: Look for the Light
Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*⁶ ‘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^[d] my people Israel.’”*

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I wonder if any of you saw the **“Christmas Star” last month?**

Especially on December 21st,

the winter solstice, the longest night of the year?

It was the appearance of Jupiter and Saturn side by side in the southwest sky.

It’s been nearly 400 years since the planets passed *this* close to each other in the sky, and nearly 800 years since the alignment of Saturn and Jupiter occurred at night, allowing nearly everyone around the world to witness what is called the

“great conjunction.” <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/the-great-conjunction-of-jupiter-and-saturn>

It was **amazing** to see such a bright light in the sky—
and imagine the wise men following a bright star like that to Jesus.

Can you even imagine **leaving your life to follow a star?**
A light in the dark night sky?

Today is Epiphany Sunday, Wise Men Sunday.

Next to Easter and Christmas,

Epiphany is one of the **oldest Christian festivals or holy days.**

January 6th, the 12th day of Christmas,

commemorates the revelation of Jesus to the **Gentiles**,

for the wise men were not Jewish.

When the wise men saw that bright star,

They were having an epiphany,

A sudden revelation about a newborn King,

one that would change their lives forever.

According to Miriam-Webster an epiphany is

*a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or **meaning** of something, an intuitive grasp of reality, an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure.*

Can you think of a time when you had an epiphany?

A sudden realization or revelation?

I call these **God-sightings.**

When was the last time you had a God-sighting?

2020 was so dark, with the pandemic, and politics and division and injustice,
And here we are starting a new year, thank goodness....

But people are still sick, dying, suffering, and separated from one another.

We need some God-sightings, don't we?

We need some epiphanies.

We need to look for some light—

just as those wise men did so long ago.

Those wise men saw this brightest star

As a sign from God, that someone had been born, a Savior, King of the Jews.

Talk about a God-sighting!

And so they left everything...***maybe three of them***...we're not exactly sure...

We really only know there were three gifts.

Some say they were royalty.... But that legend came later...

What we do know is that they were wise men who paid attention to the skies,

They were keen observers, who studied, and watched, and waited,

and finally saw this awesome star.

Then they left their homes, and traveled a great distance, with gifts in hand,
to find this new King and worship him.

When they saw the star, they didn't label it a ***coincidence***, or dumb luck,
they just left to follow it.

They were even willing to ask for ***directions***.

These were very ***unusual*** and ***wise*** men!

That's why they approached Herod when they got to Jerusalem

to find the ***exact location*** of the birth—

it was the priests and scribes who revealed

Micah's prophecy about a Savior born ***in Bethlehem***.

Do you ever wonder what their ***families' said when they left home---***

you saw what? Where?

And now you are taking what ---to whom?

How will you even know him when you see him?

Why will you worship Him?

I can only imagine the **reaction of Herod** and the chief priests when they saw these exotic men from the East come riding into town looking for a new King of the Jews... instead of Herod!

They knew when Herod called a **secret** meeting that something was amiss, and this made them even more determined to follow God's sign—get to Bethlehem, find the child, and worship Him.

And **because they did pay attention**, because they followed this star to where it stopped, the Bible tells us they were overwhelmed **with JOY**.

And their response to this joy was **GRATITUDE**, and generosity. they opened their treasure chests and gave of their finest, the very best gifts they could possibly bring—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gifts symbolic of royalty, priesthood, and death.

And they didn't stop paying attention to God's signs
After finding the baby King.
For after dinner and a good night's sleep
they were all warned in their dreams to avoid the evil King Herod,
and return **home by another road**.

We call these men WISE because they had been looking for this star.
They were **PAYING ATTENTION**, reading the skies.

Which begs the question, **what are WE paying attention to this year?**
Are we **looking for the light**—the signs from God?

2020 seemed to be focused on all things bad
Crazy politics, division, injustice, and a ruthless pandemic.

What will we focus on this year?

Two years ago on Epiphany I gave out paper stars in church.
Each paper star had a word on it like faith, service, grace, peace, mercy.
And I asked them all, instead of having a New Year's resolution,

to have a **focus—on God, in that word.**
All year long.

The words were handed out randomly,
 but each one seemed fitting to the person as the year went by.
 My word was “balance”, a good description of what God taught me all year long.

I wonder, what would your Star-Word be for 2021?

If you could choose one word that you need, you long for, you hope for,
 A word that God might already be whispering in your ear,
 What would that word be?
 Could you find a focus there, for this new year?

Most of us have tried New Year’s resolutions, not always successfully,
 So, what if we tried a ***new spiritual practice*** this year?

The Daily Examen is a way of prayerfully reflecting on the events of the day in
 order to discover God’s presence and direction for us.
 The Examen is an ancient practice in the Church
 that can help us see God’s work in our world.
 It can be used to see the ***light in the darkness*** all around us.

St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote about the Examen in his book
 called *Spiritual Exercises*.

He thought that the Examen was a gift from God,
 to be shared with all believers.

One of the few rules of prayer that Ignatius made for the Jesuit order was the
 requirement that Jesuits practice the Examen twice daily—
 at noon and at the end of the day.

It’s a habit that Jesuits, and many other Christians, practice to this day.

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

Examen is a five-step spiritual practice, with many variations.

Here is one simple process.

First—Ask God for light.

Praying to look at the day with God’s eyes, not just our own.

Second--Give thanks.

The day we have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.

Third--Review the day.

Look back carefully on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit. Where was God's presence? Where did you feel far from God?

Fourth---Face your shortcomings.

Here we face up to what is wrong—in our lives, and in ourselves.

Finally---Look ahead

And think about where you need God tomorrow.

Look for the Light.

Give thanks.

Review the Day.

Face shortcomings.

Face tomorrow.

What would happen if we started a practice of Examen,
every day, or at the end of each week or month?

Or, what would happen if we were to focus 2021,
On even just a ***single faith-word?***

Just imagine how ***this new year might be different!***

A new year ***doesn't have to be a repeat*** of the old.
We certainly don't want that after the arrival of COVID last year.
We are holding out hope for an eventual return to gatherings
and worship and hugs and handshakes!

What if our ***focus turned to God in 2021,***
And to every place we could find ***God's light?***

What if we even BECAME the light at times, in 2021?

Just like Jesus urged us to do in Matthew 5:16?

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Our passage from Isaiah 60 today was written to the Babylonian exiles who were returning home to Jerusalem.

These were people who really needed to find some light in the darkness.

They were coming home to a place that had been ruined, destroyed.

But Isaiah gave them God's hope,

the possibility of a new beginning.

Of the glory of God living within them.

Doesn't that sound great?

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

²*For darkness shall cover the earth,
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.*

³*Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Those exiles knew what it was to look for the light.

Do we?

The Yale Center for Faith and Culture has a great podcast called *For the Life of the World*. In it Drew Collins talked about W.H. Auden's poem called *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*.

The 1500 line poem is a reflection on the true meaning of Christmas.

In that poem the Magi reflect on their journey and why they follow the star....

This is what they say:

*To discover how to be **truthful** now*

*how to be **living** now*

*how to be **loving** now*

*how to be **human** now*

Aren't we all looking for the light—
to help us be more ***Truthful? Living? Loving? Human?***

And isn't it great that the wise men weren't even Jewish?
That God used people on the outside to show everyone the way to the Savior?
These wise men brought a fresh new perspective—
So I wonder, ***are we willing to see things in a new way*** this year?

These wise men brought their gifts to Jesus—
So, ***are we willing to give to God*** this year?

The truth is, we are all Magi

We are all looking for God---

Looking for some light.

We might just find it—in a God-sighting, a word, a spiritual practice, in our world,
our homes, our hearts.

Friends, may we pay attention, just as they did.

May we look for God each and every day.

May we look for the light, wherever we can find it!

That is our ***Good News of the Gospel today!***

We can look for the light!

And when we see it, we can name it, celebrate it,

And know that God is in it!

And for the gift of light, all God's people say together, Amen.