

Where the Light Leads
Sunday January 7, 2018

Once upon a time, long, long ago, not in a galaxy far far away, but in this one, in this world, some scholars say in Iran, some in Turkey, there were Zoroastrian priests studying the skies for wisdom. These men and women – the story doesn't specify their gender – spent the hours of darkness scanning the heavens, noting the movement of the stars, the changes in their positions as the seasons turned, the appearance of shooting stars and other phenomena. In the daylight hours, they used their knowledge of other languages, faiths, and cultures to study the religious and philosophical texts of neighboring peoples, since they lived in a time when people believed that the movement of the stars and planets aligned with events on earth. And since the stars were not bound to any one land, they needed to educate themselves broadly. One night a star appeared that they had never seen before. They got out their charts and maps, their religious and philosophical scrolls to try to understand this strange star. It lay over the land of Israel so they looked to the scriptures of the Hebrew people and found these words in the writings of the prophet Micah:

*But you, O Bethlehem ...
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

Since it was commonly believed that the births of great people were announced by changes in the natural world, they understood the star as a sign of the birth of this powerful ruler.

As Zoroastrians, they believed that the purpose of any life is to "be among those who renew the world...to make the world progress towards perfection". To be among those who renew the world, Zoroastrians practice "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds;" they hold themselves to follow the path of truth and to do whatever is the right thing. They believed that those of any religion who followed these precepts were working toward the same goal, and so they wanted to see this child who would grow up to rule according to these precepts. They knew that's how he would rule because of the words Micah had written, words that are still looked to today:

[Yahweh] has told you, O mortal, what is good;

*and what does [Yahweh] require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Which is pretty much the same thing as the Zoroastrians' precepts.

So they gathered the supplies they would need on this journey. Now, whether they came from Iran or Turkey, the distance to Bethlehem was over 1,000 miles. These days you can drive it in on a highway in a little under 24 hours, but that wasn't an option for these magi. They were planning for a journey of about two years – across deserts, through regions where other people were far and few, and where foreign visitors might not be welcome. They had a lot to pack. In addition to their food and water, tents and sleeping mats, weapons and maps, they packed gifts to give to the king they hoped to find: the healing herbs of frankincense and myrrh, and gold – what king doesn't appreciate gold?

At last they set out. We don't know how many were in the party – the story doesn't give the number of priests though tradition has set the number at three – and presumably they were accompanied by servants and perhaps body guards. They traveled by night, always heading toward the star, and rested by day. Perhaps sometimes when they found themselves in friendly settlements they told the people they met about their journey and its purpose. Some versions of the story tell of people who joined their quest, like the Little Drummerboy and Amahl, or others, like Babushka, Le Befana, and Artaban, the Other Wiseman, who turned down the invitation and spent the rest of their lives trying to make up for saying “no.”

At last they arrived in Jerusalem, Israel's ancient seat of power. In that time Jerusalem was ruled by King Herod the Great, called that by later historians to distinguish him from the other Kings Herod, his sons, grandson, and great-grandson, who would follow him. Now the magi may only be mythical figures, but Herod was very real. He is remembered as “Great” for the great buildings he had constructed – including a rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem; for the great divide he created by his cultivation of a Jewish aristocracy, and for the great and bloody violence committed at his command. Around 40 years earlier, the Roman Senate had appointed this Herod the Great “King of the Jews”. So when he got word that foreign visitors were in his city asking about a new child who had been born “King of the Jews,” you can imagine how he felt. He had the travelers brought in for questioning and without revealing his fear – or so he thought – encouraged

them on their journey and just asked them to visit him again on their way home so that he could hear all about this new king.

Jerusalem is only a couple hours walk from Bethlehem, so the magi were almost at their journey's end. Bethlehem was the ancestral home of Joseph, the child's father, and there the star rested over a house. Inside the house they found the child's mother, Mary, and Jesus, who would have been a toddler of about 18 months to two years. The story says they worshipped the child when they found him – not as a god, but as a sign of the respect they held for him. In pictures they're portrayed as kneeling before him, but remember the times you've performed "baby worship" – I imagine that pretty soon they were on the floor talking and playing with him. Perhaps they told him stories of their journey - he was a child who enjoyed the stories of his elders; perhaps they took him outside to show him the beauty of the stars – he grew into a person who wasn't afraid of the dark and could find light in it; perhaps they told him of their faith and its precepts of following the path of truth and rightness wherever it might lead – and certainly as an adult he followed that path.

Whatever they said and however long they stayed, at last it was time to go home. The night before they were to leave, each of them dreamed images of Herod, children, and spattered blood, and after comparing their disquieting dreams, they decided to trust their instincts and not report back to him. They took the dangerous course of traveling home by another route, dangerous now because they were disobeying the ruler of a land in which they had no rights, but they managed to cross the border to freedom and home.

Perhaps they told Joseph of their distrust of Herod, for soon Joseph had his own disquieting dream and packed up his wife and son and fled to Egypt – just in time because back in Jerusalem, when the Magi didn't return, Herod decided to deal with the possible threat to his kingship by killing all boys in Bethlehem under the age of two. Though there is no historical documentation for that massacre, no scholar would put it past him.

So how is this strange tale relevant today? What does it say to us, especially this week when we have abruptly transitioned from visions of Christmas Eve sugar plums and New Year's fireworks to images of record cold on the East Coast but record warmth in Alaska, learned- and experienced - the new word "Bombogenesis," inched possibly closer to war with North Korea, and worried even more about the competence of our elected leaders to do the right thing. What light can a story about Zoroastrian astrologers shed for us in these chaotic times?

First it offers us the image of the magi night after night studying the skies. Seeing stars and understanding their place in the universe takes practice. Sometimes we take the presence of stars for granted and almost forget to look at them. As Emerson wrote,

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would [people] believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

Sometimes it's not just that the stars seem too familiar to be wonderful: sometimes, much as we might desire to see their light, we are too afraid of the dark to risk going out into it. As Annie Dillard wrote,

You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it.

Finding our way in the darkness of the world takes practice; it takes a practice. That practice will differ for each of us; just as the stars we fix on will differ. Will your stars come from a practice of meditation and prayer? From serving at the Food Pantry or Father Bill's or the Women's Lunch Place? From clearing paths in the woods or in life where others may walk? For the magi didn't see a star and then get up and follow it. They trained their minds and hearts as much as their eyes over years of practice, study, and discussion with their community to reach the point where they were able to see and follow.

And that leads to the second image their story offers us. It's not just a matter of perceiving the star but being ready when the time comes to set out on a journey. If you haven't done the preparation work, you won't get very far, whether it's a journey of 1,000 miles, or across the street, or within yourself.

Third, you don't embark alone. Whether there were three of them or 30, the Magi discerned, debated, dreamed, and traveled together. We need the support of a community to help us evaluate our dreams and the ways we realize them as well as to help us achieve them. Even if you may be physically alone on the actual journey, it's important to be rooted in a community of support.

And finally, be prepared to return home by a different route. It may be the route of resistance to outside forces but it may also be a different route within your own life, a resistance to forces that bind you as well as others.

And however the route may differ, know that you will return home yourself changed even if you are on the same roads as the ones you set out on. The journey and whatever you learned along the way will change you in ways that may be wonderful but also painful. You may no longer exist comfortably in the parameters of your former life. Your family and friends may not understand the why and the what of your journey – and you may not understand how they can rest at home. T.S. Eliot focuses on this in his beautiful poem *Journey of the Magi*. In the poem, one of the magi looks back, recounting their trip, and ends with the reflection:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt.
I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and a poet himself, wrote about this poem,

Eliot never wanted to present religious faith as a nice cheerful answer to everyone's questions, but as an inner shift so deep that you could hardly notice it, yet giving a new perspective on everything and a new restlessness in a tired and chilly world.

Once you have trained your eyes to see the stars it is impossible to un-see them.

Live to see clearly and the light will come / To you, and as you need it, a wise man – but not a magi – tells a young boy in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem *Isaac and Archibald*. But it's the same advice the ancient wise ones might have shared with the child they found in Bethlehem. And it's the advice we too need to hold onto in our chaotic and often dark and fearful times – hold onto what is true and guide our steps by its light. In the midst of fake news, “fire and fury,” the move to open coastal waters to drilling, and rumors of war, we must hold onto what is true, practice good thoughts, good words, good deeds, and do what is right, supporting

each other in our acts of courage and resistance, especially when those actions bring us home by another road.

We make these journeys, trusting in the light which leads us on, trusting in the love of those who journey with us, and trusting in the someday reality of the destination - the home for which our hearts yearn, that realm of peace and joy for all.

- Pamela M. Barz

Reading

The Map Our Dreaming Made by Jan Richardson

I cannot tell you
how far I have come
to give this blessing
to you.

No map
for the distance crossed,
no measure
for the terrain behind,
no calendar
for marking
the passage of time
while I traveled a road
I knew not.

For now, let us say
I had to come by
a different star
than the one
I first followed,
had to navigate by
another dream
than the one
I loved the most.

But I tell you

that even here,
the hope
that each star belongs
to a light
more ancient still,

and each dream
part of the way
that lies beneath
this way,

and each day
drawing us closer
to the day
when every path
will converge

and we will see the map
our dreaming made,
luminous in every line
that finally led us
home.

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