

Illumination

“Jesus is our one star.”
Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. John H. Hice
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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Night Skies

I remembered the night sky of the Northern Hemisphere. A clear night with the constellations clearly defined: Cassiopeia and Orion; Ursa Major and Ursa Minor with Draco winding in-between – and Polaris, the North Star, to guide me. All so familiar. Then, looking up to the night sky as I did in Kruger Park in South Africa, it seemed as though someone had taken a big spoon and stirred the heavens, stars coming to rest in strange, yet beautiful arrangement. Looking upward at the night sky in the Southern Hemisphere: no familiar constellations, except I thought I figured out which was the Southern Cross.

Sometimes it feels like the world is like that. Different peoples experience life...so differently. Beyond the impasses of political sides, just being an American can mean something vastly different to you than it does to me. I have a hard time understanding why the French prefer to eat runny eggs. How can my Vietnamese friends in Grand Rapids delight in eating parts of the crab I would remove before cooking? It escapes my understanding how little girls from Middle Eastern families Dearborn can play comfortably while wearing long dresses and *hijabs*.

Some assume when differences run deep as the ocean they have to pose a dire threat. Today, some think all Muslims are really terrorists intent on *jihad*; and I remember years ago being told to fear the Chinese because “they don’t value life the way we do.” Really?

It’s like we all look up and see the stars in different patterns. Differences set us apart and sometimes spin us into contention. Contention so strong that you might think that above everything else you have to protect yourself. So personal security goes near the top of the list of concerns for individuals and families; then listen to campaign debates and actions of governments – you get the idea that national security shares the top of the list with domestic economy the world over.

From the interpersonal to the international: we are *not yet* a unified world at peace.

Which Plan?

Though that's what we long for. From the way Jesus' story begins in the Gospel according to Matthew, it sounds like a world at peace has been in the back of everybody's mind and the depth of everybody's heart for millennia. What would it be like if countries weren't obsessed with becoming empires and beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks – really and once-and-for-all? What would it be like if we could share our bread and our medicine so that people wouldn't starve or die prematurely and that we all could even enjoy life together?

Disagree with his politics like I have; but John Lennon's song named a longing that continues to resonate with most everyone years after his death. The song was heard again this year in Times Square on New Year's Eve; it's become a tradition – right before midnight and naming a universal hope for a new year.

*Imagine all the people living for today...
Imagine all the people living life in peace...
Imagine all the people sharing all the world...
(that) the world will live as one.¹*

It seems that this longing was strong even 2000 years ago. Great empires had come and gone before Rome had its day. Every empire already had their way of imposing their form of peace and prosperity on the rest of the world by the force of their own form of brutality. It was always *their* peace and security at the expense of many others. Some would say it's the same way today. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer. That's the way it went; and that's the way it goes.

Yet, 2000 years ago there was this growing, popular notion around a vast region of the world. There was going to be a time when peace and justice would come. It was going to get here with the birth of a king who would be like no other king. Hebrew prophets had spoken of it. Pagan seers had imagined it. And in that Roman world where cultures mixed perhaps beyond our appreciation, the hopes mingled.

Some scholars suggest that the Magi might have come from as distant a land as present-day China.² Not kings, but pagan seers of an occult: probably not just three of them, but maybe 12 or many more. Perhaps they belonged to a fraternity of sages. They looked at the sky to read its signs; and they saw a new star rising. It behaved unlike any other star and it mustered their hopes.³ They gazed at it; followed it. It was like they were willing to leave the world as it has always been and obey the call of the world as it would be...

under the authority of this new king

in this new day

in which the universal longing would be satisfied

by the fulfillment of God's dream and promise.

Striking, that Herod who ruled over the place of the child's birth and the religious leaders of the child's people were all *troubled*. They could cite the prophecies in scripture and feign sincerity in honoring him with their lips; but in truth they would only want to destroy him. It was like they got more out of keeping the violent, unjust world as it was – status quo – than making like the magi.

Who found the child and were filled with joy.

No wonder they gave him gifts fit for a king. They wanted to belong to a world like the one he came to bring.

Have you ever wondered what Matthew was getting at when he included this strange story that's ever-fascinated us? What was he thinking? Did he mean that Jesus was bound to be born for more than just one tribe?

What if Jesus is for the whole world and not just a certain nation? What if he is the hope for people who wear *berkas* and for those who drive on the left side of the road? What if he comes to save people who have different theologies and speak in different languages? What if he is for people who look to the sky and see a Southern mix of constellations as well as those who see the Northern Lights?

One Star

One morning at Krueger Park back in South Africa Laura and I rose very early, long before first light, when the night's sky was still deep and clear. We stood on the road, shaking off the shivers that come when you're torn out of the incubation of bed-covers and cast into the night's chill air. Our safari guide told us to look up; he pointed out the Southern Cross. Then he directed us to the northeast horizon and showed us a constellation that had made its brief winter appearance and was just about to set.

I *knew* it: Orion, the belted hunter I had learned as a boy. And even in the different world there was something familiar – a *common* star that bound us together with those who lived in a strange land.

Maybe this is what Matthew is getting at:

Jesus is our common star.

Gaze at him,

belong to him fully –

live for him –

and you enter into a covenant to work for the world he was born to save.

Seeing someone from another side or place as God's child – like you –

Not so different after all.

Maybe this is the beginning of Peace.

May you commit to following this new Star rising in everything you say and do –

This new Star that is Jesus.

Practice it.

'Time for the world to stop glossing over the *Peace on Earth* bit.

Peace on earth inside-and-out is the whole point.

¹ John Lennon, *Imagine*, produced 1971 by Capitol Records.

² Brent Landau, in an interview with David Crumm published on-line, December 3, 2010 on the Web Site, *Read The Spirit*. <http://www.readthespirit.com/explore/2010/12/3/christmas-surprise-three-magi-how-about-12.html?printerFriendly=true>. Landau includes greater depth in his book, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers © 2010.

³ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. VIII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. pp 140-143.