

“We Keep Seeking”
Matthew 2:1-12

Pastor Liz Miller
January 8, 2023

As part of our welcome and centering ourselves for worship each Sunday, we proclaim that “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” And frequently, through our prayers and liturgy and sermons we will specifically name different identities that may not have always been welcome or felt welcome in Christian community that we want to make sure hear an affirmation in this Christian community.

We name different gender identities and expressions that are welcome, we name a rainbow of sexualities, we lift up the whole lifespan rejoicing in the presence and sounds of infants and toddlers and giving thanks for our young adults and middle aged members as well as our retirees and elders. We lift up single folks and widows and divorced folks. And still, even with our intentional welcome and our inclusive words, it is impossible to give voice to every identity or reason why someone may have felt excluded from Christian community before.

One of those identities that I fear we do not give a frequent enough explicit welcome to is our scientists. We take it for granted that we are a congregation of biologists and botanists and entomologists, chemists and physicists and geneticists. We are a church of computer engineers, electrical engineers, civil engineers, environmental engineers, and mechanical engineers. We are a church that believes in God and believes in the scientific method - not despite each other, but because our faith in one informs our faith in the other. So if you have ever wondered if science and religion can coexist, you are welcome here.

The Epiphany story of the magi is the sacred story that not only affirms the important role of scientists as people of faith, but it illuminates the relationship between science and faith and

how they might positively impact each other. We know very little about the identity of the magi but we know that they are astronomers. They did what astronomers today still do: they looked to the sky and studied the stars. The magi used their knowledge of the patterns of the moon and stars to chart a course of travel. By studying and following a star, they began a journey that took them first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in search of the newborn king.

The study of the stars is a field that continues to grow leaps and bounds as our telescope technology advances, but it is also one in which most of us have engaged in even the most casual of ways. How many of us can identify the big and little dipper or Orion in the night sky? How many of us know how to distinguish with just a glance the difference between a planet and a star? How many of us have made a pilgrimage up north in search of the aurora borealis or have an epic story about where we were during the 2017 total solar eclipse? We are drawn to the sky - to understand it, to identify its different phenomena, to make connections between our life down here with what we witness up there. Even for those of us who don't fully understand what we are seeing or how the science works, the stars are a touchstone that help orient us, ground us, and inspire us.

Why, just outside the sanctuary there is a framed photograph of star TYC 3203-450-1 - more commonly known as The Lizard Star in the constellation Lacerta. It is a single snapshot from the Hubble Space Telescope that inspires wonder and awe such that it builds a bridge from science to art. Similarly, one of the biggest stories in astronomy last year was the release of images from another telescope, the James Webb Space Telescope. The details that emerged from this telescope's findings illuminate the galaxies that lay beyond our eyesight. It was a splash of colors and shapes that gave new insight but also deepened the depth of our wonder at the universe.

The more we learn about the sciences - the deeper our knowledge goes - the more we stand in awe at the Creator of the universe, at all the patterns and events that conspired together to create all that is out there and all that is right here before us, the Creator that created the sun and moons and galaxies and planets and stars is the Creator that made you and her over there and him, those folks back there, and even me.

Dr. Martah Moore-Keish, a professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, in responding to the images from the Webb telescope said, “Looking up and out makes us look in and around. It makes us ask: what does all of this (out there) have to do with us (down here)?”

I wonder if that same question is what anchored the magi on their quest. What do the stars up there have to do with us down here? When the magi looked to a star up there and back down here, they encountered two very different situations. Their first encounter was with King Herod, who in hearing what knowledge the magi had of the birth of a little baby, became afraid. The magi shared what they knew and understood with Herod and heeded his instructions to continue their journey.

This led them to their second encounter, to the child the star had foretold them about,. In this encounter there was no fear, only joy. A joy so deep they offered the best gifts they had on hand to this child and his mother.

Looking up and out at the star led the magi to these two different encounters - to a frightened king and a joyful child - to Herod and to Jesus - and it was up to the magi as to what would happen next. Would they return to Herod and tell him how to find the child? Or would they protect the child from Herod’s fear by going home another road. The magi choose to protect their joy, to protect the child, to accept the risk to their own safety by defying Herod. The magi,

in reflecting on what the night sky was teaching them, chose a carefully chartered path that rejected a powerful king and centered a child.

In doing so, we are reminded that what we learn from the natural world, the wonder and awe that the universe inspires in us, is not the last word. It is what we do with that wonder and awe that makes the difference. Dr. Mark Douglas, who is a professor of Christian Ethics, says, “Wonder is a way of engaging our world that gives meaning to our questions, without ever answering all of them. It’s a recognition that the same drives that have shaped our progress forward in time have also made possible our extinction and awareness that the more we know about ourselves, the more we realize how little we are aware of what we are doing and why we are doing it...Wonder needs to lead into something greater that can be expressed in virtues like faith and hope and love and can be shaped toward worship...Wonder may be able to supply or motivate us.” Dr. Douglas evokes German theologian Rudolph Otto who says that when we look at the stars, “We should walk away from viewing them more than a little humbled by our place in time in the cosmos and more than a little bit clearer about our obligations to others during that place and time here on earth.”

The magi’s study of the stars did not just lead them to Jesus, it gave them the answer of what they should do next. In light of the wonder we witness in the world around us, in the awe of the night sky, in the vastness of the cosmos, what are we called to do? How are we called to act? The answer for the magi was to act in protection of a child, to choose joy over fear, to risk their safety in protection of a family. The star of wonder led them to Bethlehem and it is that same star that helped them discern the way home that reflected who they were called to be.

The decision to choose fear or joy, to side with power or to protect the powerless is still before us. It is enacted every day in our politics, in the ways we witness conflict and war, in our

communities and workplaces. We are faced with ethical decisions that sometimes it feels like we are the ones who are powerless in the face of someone with more power telling us what to do. Or we are faced with decisions that will have an impact on someone else further down the road, like an environmental impact that will not be fully felt until the next generation comes of age. In the face of these decisions, we are called to follow the magi and look to the stars, look to the sky, look to the science that invokes wonder and awe and reminds us of the magnitude and splendor of creation, of God's creation. How might we make the decision that is in line with the rest of creation? How might we make the decision that protects our neighbors in the universe? How might we use our experience of wonder and awe to point us to a faith that chooses love and joy and hope every single time?

In the church we mark the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Lent with devotionals, ritual, with prayer practices. Today's story of the magi ushers in the season of Epiphany that is found between Christmas and Lent. Perhaps this season, though often overlooked, should be marked as the season of faith and science, the season of exploring how our love of the natural world might inform our faith, how wonder might help us in our discernment to choose love and joy in every decision before us. Perhaps in following the stars, as the magi did, we might find ourselves on a journey that leads us to places unexpected that feed our spirits and strengthens our faith.

Kevin Hainline, an astronomer at the University of Arizona, gave a talk at the University's chapel, something like a sermon, about what we should do when we look up at the stars whether it is looking up at the night sky or peering at the images of the greatest telescopes in the world. He says, "Don't think I'm so small, I'm so insignificant, what am I. Instead, think this: the universe put me together. And I'm pretty great. The God of the universe, who put you

and me together made in the image of the cosmic God and made out of the same cosmic dust and gas, the God who determines the number of the stars and gives all of them their names, but also knows your name and mind. To know that. To know that. To see that. To behold that. To feel that is to be all the wiser.”