

“Chase the Troublesome Signs”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Matthew 2:1-12

The ancient world was full of astrologers, people who studied the stars, searching for meaning and purpose in a life that often felt unpredictable and chaotic. We tend to dismiss them as charlatans, thanks to the tawdriness of newspaper horoscopes and the hyper-rationalism of the Enlightenment. But what these wise magi of old believed is not so far from what we ourselves hold true.

They thought that the universe made sense at a fundamental level and that, since we are part of the universe, integral participants in it, understanding the universe could reveal insights about events here on Earth. We interact, in ways we do not readily perceive or comprehend, with all that has been created, seen and unseen. And for those who spend time around children or pets, we frequently suffer exaggerated, unpleasant behavior during the full moon.

Still, I sometimes wonder why those wise men from the East followed the unusual star they saw. What motivated them to travel such an inconvenient distance? What inspired them to see significance in that bright light? Still more, though, I wonder why this small group made the journey, when so many others noted the star’s strange brilliance and transit through the sky, yet stayed home.

Maybe they had other pressing business. Often the creatures of a king’s court, perhaps all the other magi lacked leave to pursue this fascinating celestial sign. Perhaps they felt the trip simply not worth it. Could it be that they doubted their ability to follow the star to where it went, or sensed that nothing of much importance would likely be found beneath it? Maybe they thought the project impossible, like chasing the tail of a rainbow; an illusion that leads ever

onward, never bringing us to the fabled pot of gold. Of course, we can only speculate, but our knowledge of human nature provides ample clues about the motives of those who went and those who stayed.

We can only imagine, though, what would have happened if none of the astrologers of that age had taken the trouble to follow the star and find the place where the child was laid and paid him homage. In the grander scheme of things, I suppose it would have made little difference. We would be deprived of a beautiful story surrounding the birth of Jesus. Our crèches would be a little less elaborate. Mary and Joseph would not have received those precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which likely proved useful during their flight to Egypt not long after the magi returned to their home by another road.

And as to the magi who came to Bethlehem, who knows what staying at home might have meant for them? They viewed Jesus as King of the Jews, but no mention of Messiah or what that might have meant to them is ever made. They disappear from the story of Jesus, just as mysteriously and as suddenly as they appeared.

However, we would be terribly impoverished, were it not for that small band of intrepid explorers, who counted the cost and found it worthy, who made the journey and saw what lay beneath the star. We would be deprived of a great witness. The magi show us what it takes and what it means to seek out a sign with hope instead of fear, with a compelling passion for knowledge and wisdom, instead of complacent apathy. The magi show the power and reward of perception and persistence. We would do well to follow their example.

How many times have we searched for a sign from God and missed it because we were distracted, looking in the wrong place at the wrong time? Doubtless, there were ancient astrologers, marred by a strange prejudice, who looked only to the north or the east or the south

for stars that mattered, never imagining that such a significant sighting might be had to the west. Such narrow-minded thinking has not abated through the ages. If anything, the highly segmented, compartmentalized thinking of the modern era has more severely crippled our capacity to connect the dots that reveal the broader picture. We have preconceived notions of how God communicates and do not trust signs that fail to conform.

How many times have we seen that great light, hovering in the distance, yet chose to study it no further, much less bother to chase it down, because we felt the quest futile, a fool's errand, or too much trouble or risky to our reputation or settled sense of equilibrium? The dream, waking or sleeping, that we strive to forget or give up on figuring out; the alignment of occurrences we label coincidence, because we cannot bear the thought of a superintending intelligence, organizing events without our concurrence and beyond our control; the simple practices of attention that cause us to notice the whispered hint, which we then ignore or treat as delusion, because we sense the might and majesty and splendor that could turn our world upside down, and flee from it in dread.

At the heart of all this avoidance lies a lack of trust: in God; in ourselves; in the truth that we are connected, not isolated; that there is order and meaning and purpose to be found in creation, if we pierce the veil of the wild and savage surface of the world in which we live. We simply cannot believe, because we have been constantly told not to, that God can and will and does reach out to us, in myriad and unexpected ways, to draw us close to the Christ child, so that we can experience the awe of perfect peace embodied in his person.

It seems incredible, and if not for faith, it would be. But faith teaches us to watch for signs and honor them when they appear, and those same signs that faith empowers us to see strengthens our faith that we are not alone, that we have not been left behind, that there is more

to this world than is dreamt of in our imaginations, ready to be discovered and pursued and cherished and revered.

So give thanks for the wise men and pattern your life on their long-ago journey. Fill your life with courageous curiosity. Give thanks for God's signs. They aren't everywhere, but we can find them somewhere, with open eyes, ears, and hearts. Discard distraction, whatever form it may take, and seek to perceive signs, both feint and flashy, that convey the message, "God loves you. God loves you enough to become human and prove it. You belong to God and, therefore, connect to everything with which God connects." There are wonders to be seen. Watch, chase, and be "overwhelmed with joy." Amen.