

Guiding Light
Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, January 7, 2007

This comes straight from my “Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction” file: at 70 years old this year, “Guiding Light” is America’s longest-running soap opera, and it was inspired by a collection of sermons. As humorist Dave Barry might say, “I’m not making this up.” It seems that “Guiding Light’s” creator, a woman named Irna Phillips, based the soap opera on her own tragic life: At age 19, Irna wound up pregnant but unmarried. The baby’s father wanted nothing to do with her, and Irna ended up giving birth to a still-born baby. Irna took great comfort in the sermons of the Reverend Preston Bradley, a Chicago minister and radio preacher, and through his inspiration triumphed over tragedy. She went on to create not only “Guiding Light,” but also “Another World,” “The Edge of Night,” and “As the World Turns.” Originally a 15-minute radio program that started in 1937, “Guiding Light” centered around a character based on Preston Bradley named the Reverend Doctor John Rutledge, his family and friends, and the people who came to him for help. People came to Rev. Rutledge by following a lamp he set up in his study, a beacon meant to be a guiding light to those in need.¹ Like I said, I’m not making this up.

In the hands of Irna Phillips, Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus might make for a pretty good soap opera: Mary is engaged, but not yet married, to Joseph when it is discovered that she is pregnant. Everyone, including Joseph, wonders who the father is. Just when it looks like Joseph will send Mary away, an angel appears to him in a dream to fill him in on the details: The angel tells Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:20-21). While the angel’s message probably raised as many questions as it answered, Joseph was a righteous and God-fearing man, so he did as the angel

¹ From “Preston Bradley of the People’s Church” at <http://www.compassrose.org/uptown/preston-bradley.html>.

instructed. He didn't send Mary away, but married her. We know that Matthew's story isn't a soap opera because next he tells us that Joseph "had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son"—no one is that chaste on daytime television—"and he named him Jesus" (1:25).

If this story with its malicious rumors, miraculous birth, and mysterious father hasn't captivated your interest by now, you may not be watching enough TV. So cue the foreign royalty, stock characters on many a soap. "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage'" (2:1-2). It turns out that not only is the child Jesus the savior of his people, he is also the King of the Jews. Which makes for an interesting dilemma. There is already a king of the Jews, and his name was Herod. Well, Herod wasn't Jewish, not *really*, and he was actually more of a puppet of the Roman emperor than king in his own right, but why let the facts get in the way of a good story? It's never stopped the producers of CSI or "Law & Order."

One fine day—or was it a dark and stormy night?—wise men from the East show up in Herod's capital and start asking politically dangerous questions. They want to know where they can find the child who has been born king of the Jews in order to worship him. These wise men, or magi, had read the announcement of Jesus' birth not in any bulletin, not even in Scripture, but in the heavens. The magi were not simply wise men, but priests and scientists, trained to interpret natural phenomena like stars, dreams or other portents. The rising of a star represented the coming of a king. Due to the connection between celestial and terrestrial events, "nothing is more likely than that thoughtful astronomers or astrologers (the two went together in the ancient world), noticing strange events in the heavens, would search out their earthly counterparts."² As

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One Chapters 1-15* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 10.

priestly interpreters of heavenly events, the magi had observed a star at its rising and now wished to pay homage to the new king whose birth it announced.

Thus the star becomes, well, a star in the story. Many modern astronomers, scientists, and theologians have attempted to explain the star and its appearance, suggesting everything from Halley's comet, to supernovas, to the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn, to UFOs. Though Matthew's text will not yield any further clues about its nature, the star itself is clearly the source of much important information. Having indicated the birth of a king, it has brought the magi from their homes in the distant East as far as Jerusalem. Now the resident king wants to know from them "the exact time when the star had appeared" (2:7). The star is no longer an object of intellectual fascination and religious interest to these priestly scholars. It has become an object of personal and political interest to Herod. The King James Version says that Herod "enquired of [the magi] diligently," and that is exactly what the Greek verb means: to inquire into something assiduously, with great care and accuracy. The birth of a king announced by this star threatened Herod's claim to the throne, so he means to find the child by the most exacting and scrupulous scientific means. He wanted the best, most accurate intelligence the scientific community could provide.

Herod, like the magi, sought information from the star. Unlike the magi, Herod sought not to worship the child, but to kill him. Herod and the magi are alike in another respect: Neither could find the child by the light of the star alone. Their question concerning the whereabouts of the new king caused Herod to call together the leading religious authorities in order to find the birthplace of the messiah. And where did the religious authorities turn? They turned to the prophets. The answer to the question of the origin of the Savior was to be found in the pages of the Hebrew scriptures.

Tom Long tells us, “Note the interplay here between scripture and nature. Through nature (the star), the wise men know *that* the Christ has been born, but they need the scripture to tell them *where*, that is, [to] take them to the place where they can worship him. In other words, they learn something of God from nature, but their knowledge is still incomplete.”³ Remember who these wise men are: scholars and scientists, astronomers and astrologers who were priests of a Persian religion. As such, they are “Gentiles in the extreme”⁴—“complete outsiders to the laws and prophecies of Israel.”⁵ They didn’t have years of Sunday school behind them, hadn’t taken all six years of Disciple Bible study, they hadn’t so much as picked up the scriptures that we call the Old Testament. And yet the magi see a star, and knowing what it means, they follow it. They follow that star to Jerusalem, where they “missed their goal by nine miles.”⁶ The most exact calculations, the best science, the most diligent human inquiry could not finally lead the wise men to God. What they lacked were the scriptures, the story that tells of a God who promises to be with his people and to save them from their sins.

The God of all creation is revealed in that same creation: in sun, moon, and stars; in trees, plants, and flowers; in snow-capped mountains, rugged desert terrain, and endless coastal shores. In Romans 1:20 St. Paul says, “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” Many of us feel close to God and can even claim to worship God just by being out in the natural world. But nature alone, like the star, will never bring us all the way; we will end up off target by nine miles. Reason alone, like the star, will only get us so far. The God of all creation

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 19. The italics are Long’s.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 145.

⁵ Long, 18.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “Off by Nine Miles” in *The Christian Century*, January 6, 2001, found at <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/getarticle?artid=ATLA0000646471>.

is revealed not just in that creation but in the particular story of Israel and its Law and Prophets. We, like the wise men, need the scriptures in order to find God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ. We do not find our way to Jesus without scripture. God's "definitive revelation is found not in the stars,"⁷ but in the scriptures, the biblical story, the word of God, the Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:14).

Friends, if we wish to find God, to know the One who created us, we must look to the scriptures. We may start in nature or in science or in eastern religions or philosophy, but we will find the God of Jesus Christ revealed only in his story. It is a story of love and loss, of mystery and miracle, of promise and passion, of suffering and sacrifice. It is a story for all people in all places at all times. We read that story, God's story of redeeming love, in Jesus, the Word made flesh, our savior and king, our guiding light. Amen.

⁷ Boring, 142.