

Sermon: We Are All Magi
Text: Matthew 2:1-12
Date: January 6, 2019
Context: WWPC
Epiphany Sunday

. . . we observed his star at its rising . . .

Mat. 2:2a

Once there was a star.

The Puerto Rican astronomer, Wanda Diaz Merced, tells the story this way:¹

“Like everything else, she was born [was this star]; [she] grew to be around 30 times the mass of our sun and lived for a very long time. Exactly how long, people cannot really tell. Just like everything in life, she reached the end of her regular star days when her heart, the core of her life, exhausted its fuel. But that was no end.

“She transformed into a supernova, and in the process [she] released a tremendous amount of energy, outshining the rest of the [stars in the] galaxy and emitting, in one second, the same amount of energy our sun will release in 10 days. And she evolved into another role in our galaxy.

“My star,” Ms. Diaz Merced observed, “my star, the one in my story, became what is known as a magnetar.”

On a cosmological scale, magnetars are so small they are almost tiny. They’re only around twelve miles in diameter. But their small size hides a powerful secret:

“They have a mass two- to three times that of the Sun”.

¹ All quotes and paraphrasing comes from the following Ted Talk:

https://www.ted.com/talks/wanda_diaz_merced_how_a_blind_astronomer_found_a_way_to_hear_the_stars

So, a stellar phenomenon that's no wider than the distance between Black Mountain and Asheville weighs at least twice what the sun weighs.

Here's the practical result of that mass: "The density of . . . a magnetar is such that a tablespoon of its substance would have a mass of over 100 million tons."

Star of wonder.

For me the most interesting part of this story is that, unlike the famous star hunters we heard about in the story Samuel helped read for us today, Ms. Diaz Merced never saw her star.

This is partly because the light waves given off by magnetars fall outside of the range of human perception. They generate truly astounding amounts of energy but it's released in x-rays and gamma rays, electromagnetic waves of light that fall outside the spectrum of light that is visible to the human eye.

But even if this particular magnetar shown with the light of our own sun she would not have been able to see it. Because it turns out that Wanda Diaz Merced, a brilliant highly trained astro-physicist is blind.

As an adult, a debilitating illness struck her and it stole her vision.

Which -- and this part is very much like the magi in our story -- led Ms. Diaz Merced on the greatest journey of her life.

Wanda loved her work. She was determined not to let mere blindness keep her from doing her science. The fact she could not look through a telescope, could not read printouts of radiological and electromagnetic data, this disability was not going to deter her.

So she invented a way to "see" the data using sound. It's called sonification -- a method for turning large data sets that are normally analyzed with one's eyes, into information that one can hear, data that can be analyzed with one's ears.

And that innovation is arguably Wanda's greatest contribution to the worldwide scientific community.

"I think that science is for everyone," she says. To the sighted and to the blind.

“It belongs to the people, and it has to be available to everyone, because we are all natural explorers.”

Wanda’s world had gone completely dark and yet she knew it was full of wonders. She just had to find a way to perceive them through her personal darkness by other means, to experience them using her other senses.

But that took special effort. When the light goes out completely, you have to be very intentional if you are going to perceive it.

The magi in our story saw their star because they were looking for it, intentionally, and that changed everything for them.

And it is a reminder to us to keep our own eyes and ears and hearts open. And church-going folk like us, or at least church-going folk like me, would do well to take heed to this reminder.

I am not an astronomer. For better or worse, I don’t spend a ton of time gazing up at the stars at night. But one thing I have in common with Wanda is that I love my job. I love being a minister, but not just any minister. I love being a Presbyterian minister in particular.

There are many reasons for this but one of them is particularly relevant to our text for today.

In the religious tradition of my childhood the Bible was primary. This book was God’s Word. And it was revered as such. When it came to knowing God’s word and understanding God’s will, the Bible was the alpha and the omega, the first and the last authority.

But when it comes the question of how God reveals God word and will to humanity, the Presbyterian tradition has a wider view than the one of my childhood. In our tradition, God’s revelation comes to us in three ways:

First, and I say first because this is mode of revelation is primary in our theological tradition.

God’s word is revealed to us in Jesus, for in the living Christ, God’s Word is made incarnate. Literally. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

When the second member of the Triune God becomes one of us, you pay attention. On this view, it follows that the life, ministry and, especially, the teaching of Jesus are of primary theological importance to our life and ministry as people who aspire to embody God's love and will and purposes.

So, first, there is the Word of God revealed in Jesus.

Second, there is the Word of God written. Or to use the more familiar name, there is the Bible.

The Bible contains the story of God's people through time, and of course it also contains the four authoritative accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. So though it is but ink on a page, like any other book, the Bible is indispensably important to our faith.

Finally there is the Word of God spoken, the Word of God proclaimed. Which is what I am doing right now, and what every preacher does on Sundays. We read the Word of God written, especially the story of the Word of God revealed in Christ, and then we interpret it for God's people.

When I first went to seminary, lo so many years ago now, I was thunderstruck by this formulation.

It made so much sense to me. It's love, as taught and practiced by Jesus, even more than the Law as brought to us by Moses that is God's primary revelation.

Now, these many years later, if you were to ask me if I still believe in this formulation, this theology of God's word, my answer would be the same today as it was then.

Yes, of course I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't be standing in this pulpit, engaged in this act of proclamation.

But I also believe there is still another way God speaks to us. And I believe that because of our story for today. The magi did not find Jesus by studying the Bible, or any sacred text for that matter.

They came to the Christ by following a star. But that, in turn, only happened because they were looking for it.

It wasn't just any star, shining in any time or place. This special star, this star of particular wonder shone down Bethlehem at a very dark time in the history of the Hebrew people.

And the act of following it, brought the magi face to face with Herod, a man with pronounced authoritarian tendencies, a man who, according to the biblical scholar Tom Long, was a strict Roman loyalist, and one who mounted large-scale building projects to signal to his Roman superiors the importance of his Jewish kingdom.

If that rings a bell, it's supposed to.

On this last day of the Christmas season, I believe that this story is still true, and is still ongoing. ` `

And, as Wanda Diaz Merced says about science, I also believe this story is for everyone, that it is for the magi in us all.

And that even in what feels like a dark time in our own history, the world is still full of wonders, bursts of light that reveal God's love and will and purpose, waiting for us to see them.