

SERMON
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Grounded in God (Part 1: the Light)

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Matthew 2:1-12

One of my favorite things to do at the cottage is to lie on the dock at night and look up at the stars. We have a family tradition that we try see who can be the first one to spot a falling star – I always seem to be looking in the wrong direction!

There is something wonderfully mystical about looking at a sky covered in millions of stars – it has dazzled us before our existence, and it will for billions of years to come. For me, it is a reminder of the awesome magnitude of God’s presence. When I stare into the night sky, I find myself asking - Where does it begin or end? How large is it? God’s presence is both visible and yet invisible. It makes me think of the first lines of our United Church Song of Faith – “We Are Not Alone.”

Humankind has always been fascinated by the stars. They have been worshipped by some and feared by others. Our Indigenous people have described and named patterns of stars in the sky and wove great legends about them – you may have heard of Orion the Hunter, Chasing The Big Dipper, or Following The Great Bear. The North Star has been a guide for mariners and pilots for generations. And I am sure that you have all heard the story of how escaped slaves in the south followed the Northern Star to make their way North to Canada via the Underground railroad – the famous folksong “Follow The Drinking Gourd” tells the story of following the Northern Star.

Some people believe that stars are the key to our behavior and, if we read them correctly, they can forecast the direction of our lives. Some put great faith in these forecasts, and live their lives accordingly. Now as people of faith, you might be likely to frown upon such astrological ideas. But, there is something in the notion that stars can guide us. The question is – who or what controls the stars?

Hebrew scriptures contain many references to the great numbers of stars, their beauty and their mystery. The Book of Job, which scholars believe is likely the oldest Biblical text, speaks of the stars and the constellations with great respect. It states that God set them in place and it references the same constellations we know today. Many other Biblical writers also state that God arranged the stars. For example, **Isaiah 40:26**

“Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.”— ISAIAH 40:26

Even Jesus himself in the book of Luke encouraged us to look to the stars; he says:

“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars...”— LUKE 21:25

So, it is Biblically legitimate to look for signs in the stars, but always remembering the distinction between looking for God given signs and worshipping the stars.

Deuteronomy 4:19 warns us:

“...when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.”
DEUTERONOMY 4:19

One Bible story that we think of this time of year, a story that has been told and retold, is the story of the wise men following the star to find Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem. These men were described as Magi, a word used to portray the Persian priestly and learned class. They were wealthy, educated men who studied the stars. We know that they had a good understanding of scripture by the way in which they quoted the prophet Micah to King Herod. They believed that the sighting of this new star in the sky was a sign from God. A sign that the Messiah, King of the Jews, had been born. A sign that the prophecy had been fulfilled. And so they obediently followed the light. They didn't know how long the journey would take; they didn't know exactly where it would lead them – but they obediently followed the light.

Light plays an important part in our Christian story. As people of faith, we know that the baby Jesus grew up to be “the light of the world.” In that dark stable, he shed the light of a new beginning for his people. When he was a young boy in the temple, he spoke with wisdom and understanding and brought new insights and a new light to the world. In his ministry he brought light into the darkest corners of people's lives. And it seems significant that at midday, the very hour that Jesus died, the sky darkened, and a light went out in the world.

I think that many today are still looking for a light to guide them. Some people follow the guide of earthly pleasures to take them into some kind of different realm, like drugs, alcohol, or sex. But more and more, people are looking to find a sense of Spirit to guide them. There is a huge rise in “spirituality.” Diane Butler Bass in her book “Grounded: Finding God in the World”, describes us as being in the middle of a Spiritual revolution. You have probably heard people say they are “Spiritual, but not religious.” As church goes, some of us might scoff at that; it threatens the very existence of the traditional church. But what it really means is that they are seeking the Divine in the world around them. They are turning away

from religious institutions and the dogma of doctrines and theology, and turning instead to **experience** the Spirit. They are not just looking to the heavens to see the light, but they are willing to see and experience the Light of God all around them.

Sometimes I think we are guilty in the church of having a vertical faith – one that only concentrates on God in the heavens – like a distant light in the sky. It maintains a separation between us and God; it preserves a sense of distant wonder of the Divine – something like looking at a starry filled night sky. But really, the sky begins at our feet. We might walk on the ground, but our bodies move through the sky. We live in a place where the earth and sky meet. A place where God is always on the horizon. Always present. God’s heavenly presence is the very air that we breathe.

On this Epiphany Sunday, we think of the Magi journey, coming to the stable to find the Christ child. We think of them following the light in the sky, guided by God. But really, the story is more about them finding the light on earth, not in the sky, light in the form of the Christ child. Jesus brings together the sky and the earth. Jesus was and is the Light, the incarnate Spirit of God.

The word epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning to reveal. It is a moment of sudden revelation or insight. When the Magi saw the Christ child, they had a revelation that this was the long-awaited Messiah, and they bowed to worship him. This epiphany, may God’s Spirit be revealed to you. May you find God’s presence not just in the distant night stars in the sky, but may God’s light be revealed in the world around you. May you experience God in a new and revealing way.

Amen.