

Following the Star
January 3, 201 | Anita Retzlaff

A poem by Katie Cook entitled *Benediction*:

Let us go in peace now;
For our eyes have seen
God's salvation.
We have stood dumbstruck,
before the manger.
We have exchanged glances with the
shepherds and looked, sheepishly,
out of the corners of our eyes
at the wise men.
We have listened, with terror and
delight, to the messengers with their
extraterrestrial song.
We, who have walked so often and so
long in terrible darkness,
have been flooded with holy light.

Let us go in peace now;
We have brought our
gifts to the manger –
and for some of us it was merely
our broken selves –
but now, like the shepherds,
we must go back to our fields;
like the magi,
we must go home another way.

Let us go in peace now;
May this Holy Child guide our steps
into the new year,
and give us the courage
to give birth to God's realm.

We have been dismissed from our celebrations, not to merely wait for Christmas to come round again. Rather, we are blessed and sent out into this new year to do something; to be somebody. In a sense we are always a people on the move as Jesus Followers. There are always new ways to express -- with our lives -- the salvation story that we have heard yet one more time and along with Mary, treasure in our hearts.

We do not walk into this New Year blind. Quite the opposite! We are gifted with God's good gifts to urge us into the challenges and opportunities ahead. After the big holiday blitz we have entered a time

of transition in the church year: the season of **Epiphany**. 2016 is still very new – three days old yet our journey into 2016 is grounded in the ancient language of God’s presence. **Epiphany** means “manifestation” or “revealing” or “shining forth.” **Epiphany** stretches between the times of Christmas and Lent. In this time God’s light shines brightly over us -- into our world -- illuminating all of life. God’s light makes clear that we will need courage to live as disciples. As this New Year dawns there are competing kingdoms clamouring for our loyalty and devotion. The story of the wise men – the coming of the light – presents these kingdoms to us. There is a star to follow. Will we know it when we see it?

Our traditional rendering of the story of the wise men from the East has embellished details by naming the star-followers as “kings” and proposing that there are “three” of them. Our story from Matthew does not give us any information about “three kings.” Check it out. However, if we assign to the magi, these wise men, the status of royalty, we could then say that there is a story here with three kinds of kings. Herod is the king of Judea; a temporal king who has authority to govern and rule over the people. Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem is called the King of the Jews. If you grant kingly status to the wise men, there is a royal authority given to the study of the science of the day; astronomy and astrology which would in those days include dream interpretation.

The story opens before us three kinds of power: political, religious and scientific. Three kinds of kings. Three kinds of kingdoms. Each one with star power. Each one with followers. The birth of Jesus provokes a conflict that is played out forever after. Whom do we serve: nation, faith or science? Whose star do we follow?

The images and metaphors from scripture, the stories of light and darkness in the Old and the New Testaments point toward an answer. The beautiful poetry of Isaiah describes the light that comes from God; a light that exposes the dark places. God’s message of love draws people: compels nations to find out what this is all about. The relationship that God has with his people is the brightness that guides all of life and calls all nations to participate. The relationship that God has with Israel is built on goodness and wholeness and life-giving choices. Many are drawn to the light; all are welcome.

The New Testament story of the wise men also testifies to the draw of God’s light come to earth in baby flesh. Kings are drawn to the power of the star set high in the Bethlehem sky. King Herod is afraid. Wise men are intrigued. The response to the light is both joy and fear. The light of the Bethlehem star shining forth the Kingdom of God is the kingdom that appears to be the most compelling of all the options.

The star ignites curiosity, provokes a crisis of authority and evokes a response reflecting peoples' greatest desires. As we scramble to make sense of our lives we too are drawn to the rising of Jesus' star. We seek to be disciples and desire to follow Jesus' way. We want to open our lives to the brightness of Jesus' gospel and to service. We commit to following the star of Jesus' kingdom as peacemakers and stewards of the earth. The light shines into the darkness of our searching and we choose to follow as best we can.

The other kingdoms of this world are also lights in God's creation but they remain in service to the greater light. We live in a world where politics matters; where science matters and where leadership is of utmost importance. So we give our lives to following the star that speaks peace, love, joy and hope; our advent themes on which we base our life in Christ and on which we build the Kingdom of God now!

I would like to close with a poem by Ann Weems "It Is Not Over."

"It Is Not Over" - Ann Weems

It is not over,
this birthing.
There are always newer skies
into which

God can throw stars.
When we begin to think
that we can predict the Advent of God,
that we can box the Christ in a stable in Bethlehem,
that's just the time
that God will be born
in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.
Those who wait for God
watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
listening
always listening
for angel words.

As we prepare to receive communion and to share in the good news of God-come-among-us let us remember with gratitude the Christmas story and the gift of light that is given to us at the dawning of this new year.

AMEN