

Although our texts don't mention the story, today is structured around the star that led the magi to find Jesus. Those astrologists read something in the abnormally bright star that caused them to follow it from their homelands east of Jerusalem to discover its purpose. These magi ended up being the first apostles when, whatever meaning they took out of Jesus' birth, they carried it back to their homelands.

It was the light in the sky that drew them.

But it was the light *within* the child that

- caused them to be filled with joy.
- (that) caused them to fall to their knees and honor the child.
- (that) caused them to open their treasure chests and present him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- (that) caused them to forsake the wishes of evil King Herod, and go back to their respective countries by another route.

It was the light within the child that gave them hope for a brighter day.

As I mentioned in my homily at the later Christmas Eve service, we traditionally draw heavily upon Luke's and Matthew's narratives of the way Jesus' birth unfolded. It is Luke who places Jesus in a manger (Matthew has him in a house). It is Luke who has the angels singing to the shepherds and it is Matthew who includes the kings from afar. Of the other gospels, John speaks of

Word and Light and Life. And Mark does nothing with the birth of Jesus; choosing instead to kick off the narrative with John the baptizer preaching in the wilderness.

You may or may not have noted that today's reading from Mark comes from the FIRST chapter. Jesus is already fully grown, and is setting about the business to which he was called. It feels to me, a little anachronistic to be talking about the grown Jesus--going about his work--12 days since Christmas. But, the more I think about it, the more I recognize the appropriateness of it. There's a beautiful poem by theologian Howard Thurman called "The Work of Christmas."

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

--from Howard Thurman's *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*

What Thurman puts in verse is exactly how Mark tells us Jesus began his ministry:

- Jesus throws a demon out
- Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law
- Jesus healed many who were sick or demon-possessed
- Jesus cured a man with a skin disease

Each act of "Christmas" sparked a light in a hurting, broken world. The last act--the man being healed of his skin disease--ended with the man going out and talking freely and spreading the joyful news of his restoration. A series of lights beginning to be strung together into a constellation of hope.

John's gospel sums up Jesus activity in chapter 8, when, after freeing a woman accused of adultery from a crowd who meant to stone her to death, Jesus proclaimed, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

Contemporary Christian composer Jim Strathdee adapted Howard Thurman's "The Work of Christmas" and created a song called "I Am the Light of the World." Around Thurman's verses, Strathdee created a chorus that calls out followers of Jesus:

## **CHORUS:**

**I am the Light of the World**

**You people come and follow me.**

**If you follow and love, You'll learn the mystery**

**Of what you were meant to do and be.**

2. To find the lost and lonely one,

To heal that broken soul with love,

To feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,

To feel the earth below the sky above!

3. To free the prisoner from his chains,

To make the powerful care,

To rebuild the nations with strength and goodwill,

To (see your siblings) everywhere.

All along his way, Jesus left his light with those whom he encountered, creating a constellation of hope for “the lost, the broken, the hungry, the imprisoned, the possessed.”

The constellation didn't stop with Jesus' time. As folks have “followed and loved” they've “learned the mystery of what we were meant to do and be.” Jesus' light and love have brightened a dark world through the ages; people

like us meant to give our hearts to create an earth full of stars bringing restoration to our world.

Today, we receive Words printed on a Star, inviting us to engage with the light. These words can be calls for us to do some **inward work**: continuing, as John the Baptizer proclaimed, to turn our hearts and lives toward God. Or, they can be **outward-focused**: calling us into a deeper path of serving our brothers, our sisters - our planet.

The psalmist wrote:

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.
- 2 Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—
- 3 who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,
- 4 who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- 5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

When we engage in what Howard Thurman called “the work of Christmas,” we bless God who has blessed us so richly, and we offer hope to a world that so desperately needs it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.