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Ephesians 1:3-14
Matthew 2:1-12

Stardust Heritage

Many astrophysicists, and those who simply enjoy thinking about how the universe came to be, will tell us that stars are the matter factories of the universe. A predominant scientific theory states that it is in the stars, those huge bodies of gas, heat and energy, that all of the elements are made. The building blocks of everything we know, things like oxygen and carbon, nitrogen and iron, are created in the stars. When a star goes supernova, when it explodes and flings gas and dust out into space it is releasing the particles that will someday come together to form planets, and eventually form us. In other words, there is not a single atom in our bodies that is not a product of some star from long ago. So when we read in Genesis that God created us from ‘dust of the ground’ it is stardust that makes us up. Maybe those song lyrics, ‘We are stardust, we are golden’ written by Joni Mitchell and made famous by Crosby, Still and Nash a few years ago could be taken literally.

I like this stardust perspective on Epiphany Sunday. Today is the Sunday before the day we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas. This year it will be tomorrow. In the church it is the official end of the Christmas season. The word epiphany means ‘manifestation’, ‘showing’ or ‘appearing’.

We sometimes use the word to refer to appearances of God in the Old Testament, such as when God spoke to Abraham and Sarah through the strangers who came to tell them they would have a child after being childless for so many years. And when, after a mighty wind, God came in the still small voice to call Elisha to prophetic ministry.

On this particular day Epiphany refers to both the appearing of Christ in the world at Christmas and the arrival of the wise men, who followed the star to come to welcome and honor the child, Jesus. The star is the sign for this epiphany. It seems appropriate today to focus on star power in our lives.

It was a star that signaled to all who took notice that God was present in the world in a new and miraculous way. It was a star that guided the wise men to Jesus. If we

listen to our astrophysicists friends, Joni Mitchell, and the words of Genesis it is the star that makes us who we are. We are stardust.

The Apostle Paul comes at this from a slightly different perspective, but with an equally powerful message. The text we read together today from the letter to the Ephesians is full of this same idea. The words of blessing and affirmation tumble out of this text. If we read the punctuation as it was originally written, this is one long sentence. Paul did not even want to stop to take a breath amidst the amazing good news he had to share. He writes, ‘God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.’ We are, ‘destined for adoption as God’s children through Jesus Christ’. We have ‘redemption through his blood and forgiveness of our sins’. “In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, and are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.”

Before the foundation of the world God was at work to bring good. And, as Paul states in Ephesians, God comes for all people, Gentile and Jew. It is not about who we are. It is all about *who God is*. In Jesus Christ we are blessed, chosen and made whole.

When we put this text along side the story of the wise men they fit together well. The wise men were the first gentiles, the first non-Jews to welcome the savior. They came with all their resources, and they were many, to bow down to the one they sensed would change the world. Paul’s words of God coming for all are affirmed in a grand and regal fashion through the visit of the wise men.

But there is another part of the story of the wise men coming. One we do not like to hear and we often leave off when we tell the story to children. King Herod sent the star followers to find Jesus because he was afraid of what Jesus’ coming would mean. Jesus was a threat to Herod’s power.

Interwoven with the affirmation of the power and wonder of Christ’s coming that these men of wealth and status represent as they come to bow down before Jesus, is the tragic story of the slaughter of the innocents. It is one of the most disturbing atrocities recorded in the Bible. We read in Matthew of the response of the people to Herod’s brutal killing of children, “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

With these graphic words of a mother weeping for her slain children, we are brought close to the unfathomable pain that occurs when cruel injustice happens.

The cruelty for which we have no explanation. The injustices that continue today. Why do innocents suffer? Why do jealousy, hatred and fear continue to cause war and suffering today? This part of the story brings into sharp focus the fact that Jesus comes into the world as it is.¹ Jesus comes where we are. The blessings Paul proclaims and affirms do not solve all problems. Instead they affirm for us God's continuing action in the world today.

Two thousand years ago Christ came into a world full of injustice and pain. Christ continues to come into those same places today. The good news of Christmas can not be, and is not, an isolated event. It is not something we put away along with our ornaments and Christmas lights. The saving light of Christ is here today as much as it was 2000 years ago. Here in the midst of our injustice and fear as surely as it was in Herod's.

Today we are the star. We are that which bears witness to God presence in the world. The role the star played when Jesus was born is a role we must play today. For the acclaimed, like the wise men, and for the innocents. For the acceptable and the rejected. We are to be the good news.

When we go out at night and look up at the stars twinkling above us, the light that delights our eyes actually left those stars thousands of years ago. It is mind boggling for me to think in those terms. The star that lit the sky when Jesus was born probably went supernova thousands of years before his birth. Without getting too wrapped up in how and why and if God orders and predestines our lives, we can simply star gaze and wonder instead at a star that goes supernova at just the right time. A God who chooses us before the foundation of the world. A child born 2000 years ago who's light reaches us still. Or the fact that we, you and I, are called to be that light in the world today.

Jan Richardson in her book entitled *Night Visions*, a devotional book for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, portions of which I have shared with you before, concludes her book with these words about the Epiphany season, "As we prepare for Epiphany, God calls us to discern where the sacred shows forth, that we, too, may welcome it into our lives. The one who took flesh reminds us that to those with eyes and hearts to perceive it, the holy appears in our midst, in our lives, and in our own selves."²

Let us live our stardust heritage.

¹ Mary Lou Redding, *While We Wait: Living The Questions of Advent*, pg. 96

² Jan L. Richardson, *Night Visions*, pg. 93