

**“Living in the Light”**

Matthew 2:1-18

A Sermon Preached by Catherine Foote,  
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Tuesday, December 22, just before Christmas, as I was getting ready for work, I heard on the news that the second test flight of the new Boeing 787, the “Dreamliner,” was scheduled to take off from Paine Field in Everett at 8:45. I looked at the clock. With good timing I could make the 8:00 ferry and be there by 8:30. And my schedule on the other end was not tight, so I could wait and watch.

I love this kind of thing: big moments, big machines, big events. So I was really excited for this serendipitous discovery, that I could watch that plane take off. The ferry was right on time, and I got off with good time to spare. As I rode down the Mukilteo Speedway, I looked around for signs of the flight. I noticed things I hadn’t ever seen before, like how there were red lights on the tops of the telephone poles by the runway. And how easily I could see the runway from the road. Now that I was looking for signs, I saw them all around me.

I stopped in a parking lot and settled in. Two helicopters came into view and then just stopped there in the air, hanging rock solid over the runway. “They’re there to film the flight,” I thought. Perfect.

The other thing I noticed was that no one else around me seemed aware at all that anything was going on. I didn’t know whether to stop them and say, “Watch,” or just to let them be.

Then, as I looked, the tail of a jet appeared over some of the low buildings near the south end of the runway. It moved slowly along, until the plane came into view, turning north and preparing for takeoff. I had my camera out and after taking several pictures, set it aside so I could just watch. And the take-off was beautiful- it seemed just perfect. I was close enough hear the engines roar, and- maybe I Imagined it- to even feel the push of their power. I watched until the plane disappeared in the clouds. Then I gave a little salute- I can be pretty corny that way- and turned to walk back to my motorcycle. I was looking down at my camera, and the pictures I had taken, as I was walking. When I got back to the bike I noticed that a car was parked beside it, and a man was just getting out. He stood for awhile, looking toward the runway. I was considering telling him the plane had already gone, when he spoke.

“There it goes,” he said.

And I turned around in time to see a second plane, moving down the runway, picking up speed, and lifting off. Of course! The first plane had just been the observer plane. This second plane had been the one I was watching for, and I had almost missed it. I stood again and watched, and even managed to snap a few pictures. But I was laughing all the

way into work, thinking how easily I could have missed what I was looking for, and not even known it.

The story of the Magis' journey to find the child born under the kingly star is a similar story. Like me, they go to where they expect to find a king. They go to where the king lives. And like me, they could have easily assumed, once there, that they had seen what they came to see. But Matthew tells this story, some scholars say, to let us know that this story of Jesus is not going to be an ordinary or predictable story.

Matthew *wants* us to notice that the Sages go first to the wrong place. Because Matthew wants us to notice the contrast- the palace, the religious experts, colluding with the powerful to maintain power, the majesty and the terror of it all. Matthew wants us to remember this: You are not going to find this child, born to be a ruler, where you find typical rulers. Because as this baby becomes a man, you will not find him behaving in the ways of typical rulers, either. This story of the Magis' visit is in many ways the story of the whole gospel, Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan tell us.

*“It is Roman power alone that designated and supported Herod the Great as King of the Jews. . . . The use of the title, “King of the Jews,” is, therefore, an ‘overture-to-gospel’ theme. Roman-appointed Herod seeks to kill, and Roman-appointed Pilate succeeds in killing Jesus. The shadow of imperial execution hangs already and immediately over the birth of Jesus. Put another way, the clash between Jesus the Messiah and Caesar Augustus the emperor started right from the birth of Jesus.” Borg and Crossan, The First Christmas, pp 137-138*

Matthew wants us to know that in order to recognize this child, we will need to keep looking.

Because like we discovered in the Gospel of John, the birth stories in Matthew *are* a kind of overture to the whole story. In this overture, the music of the whole story is heard. So in the beginning, Gentile sages come looking for a Jewish king. And at the end of this Gospel, Jewish disciples are commissioned to go to the whole world with the good news of God's reign, God's love for all. And in the middle, we encounter a rabbi whose teachings are a mystery, a holy man who eats with tax collectors and sinners, and a man of upside-down power, who invites us to look at everything with new eyes. Matthew wants us to keep looking.

This newness, however, does come at a cost. Challenging the status quo, the conventional wisdom, and most significantly, those who wield the power of fear, never comes easily. Our images of Christmas almost always forget this part of the story. But Matthew makes it clear. We are not done with Christmas once the shepherds are informed and the sages offer their gifts. We are not done until the magi discover they must now go home by a different way- even *their* sense of safety has been shaken. We are not done with Christmas until the family flees to Egypt, and Herod's wrath at the threat of losing power is made real on the innocents who stand in his way. When power is held brutally and self-servingly, then there is no cost too great to keep holding on to it.

Innocents die in the fight of the powerful to maintain their power. Do not turn away from that reality either, Matthew says. Even when the grief of injustice seems unbearable, keep looking. Because the path to genuine love and justice leads us, not around suffering, not to a place where we have to deny suffering, not to a place where we might choose to go around suffering, but to a place where we are accompanied even in and through the suffering, to a new world. This story of Christmas is not a story of cheap, tinsel-laden grace, but grace that can give us the power to look at all of life, and to find love even in the places we never expected it to be.

This morning we gather as a community, longing for the turning of the world that Christmas promises- peace on Earth, a new hope born, a new year, even a new decade stretching out before us. And we can easily go looking for that newness in all the familiar places. We can easily be fooled into imagining that we have seen the real thing, when all we have seen is what we expected to see. This year, the invitation is to keep looking. Don't stop at the familiar places that seem to promise personal security at enormous expense, or personal prosperity that can somehow make you happy, or individual safety that leaves so many others at risk. Keep looking, beyond the conventional, and you will see a deeper reality and wider possibilities. Look to a world where the peacemakers are blessed, and those who mourn are comforted, and the meek inherit the earth.

Keep taking your bearings. Keep the star in mind, check in regularly with the community you trust. And when the person next to you invites you to turn around and see the unexpected, keep looking.