

Our Astral Guide
Matthew 2:1-12
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I don't know if the Christmas story was the very first part of the Bible presented to me, but it had to be close. First Mary & Joseph make their way to Bethlehem, then Jesus is born and laid in a manger, then the angel appears to the shepherds and they come to visit, and finally the magi follow the star and join in. Everyone ends up at the stable, surrounded by barnyard animals, all faces pointed to baby Jesus smiling happily upwards, just the way our family arranged our nativity scene every December.

This, of course, is not how it happens in the Bible. It's only how it happens when we're trying to lay out the story for children or for our own sense of Christmas tradition.

How it really happens, in the Bible, is that the stable, the baby Jesus in the manger, and the shepherds all show up in Luke while the wise men and their star are featured in Matthew. In the most formal Christian traditions, we're not even supposed to be recognizing and celebrating the arrival of the magi for another 12 days, on Epiphany; I've even moved up this scripture so that we can include it with our other Christmas emphases.

There are multiple reasons we want the wise men to be part of our Christmas narrative, to be featured with the newborn Jesus alongside the shepherds. There are probably half a dozen different characteristics of the travelers from the east, each one worth its own sermon, but we've been working through the Advent and Christmas narratives focusing on the light within them, and so it makes sense this morning to notice the star that the wise men follow.

Like the entirety of the Christmas story, the wise men and their star have become oversimplified. The star is depicted as a spotlight, an overwhelming ray that is so bright that the unlit areas outside of its light seem even darker. It is a laser pointer, fixed and focused and providing an incandescent trail of breadcrumbs that can be followed without even thinking about it. In some cases, it is a tractor beam that pulls the wise men along, keeping them on the rails as they make their journey to the holy family.

This is not how stars work, not for the wise men and not for us.

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I think it was the very first week of the pandemic. Culturally, we were unsure about nearly everything. There was uncertainty about what would be open—would grocery stores stay open? Would Wal-Mart? What was “essential,” anyway? There was uncertainty about where we could travel—was it okay to visit family in a different city if you'd all been quarantining? Was it okay to go to work if you basically worked alone, or only if your work was “essential?” There was uncertainty about what we would need to ride things out—you might remember the mind-boggling run on not on milk and bread like before a snowstorm but rather on toilet paper. For a short period, in the very beginning, we believed that we would really need to hunker down, to avoid every other human being on the planet except for those who lived in the same house we lived in. We thought this would be okay because it would only last a couple of weeks (ha!).

I felt particularly bad for my friends who lived in city apartments with no yards. I remember texting with people and telling them how lucky I felt to have dogs, because that gave us an excuse to be outside, to break free from the walls of our home. We still kept our distance from others, walking the dogs mostly late at night and crossing well to the other side of the street if we met another person from the neighborhood. Even then, it felt taboo to be outside, like we were skirting the law.

One night, even though it was late, our kids were still up because they hadn't gone to school that day and wouldn't go the next day and they hadn't expended much energy throughout the day and, really, what was the point of keeping a schedule anyway? They asked if we could all take a walk together, and we thought that sounded like a fine idea. We slipped out the front door and began strolling through the neighborhood. No one else was out. There were no cars on the streets, even beyond our neighborhood, so it was particularly quiet and still. We walked right in the middle of the street, moving softly but freely. It was a clear night, and we could see all kinds of stars. Bright stars that stood out against a dark blue sky, the darkness around them darker because they were brighter; clusters of smaller stars that seemed to bleed together somehow, distinct patterns stretching across some stars and imagined images connecting others. We kept our necks craned upward as we walked, pointed out different constellations, and drank in the brightness of the moon.

It was the best I felt all month. I don't have a ton of memories from those early weeks that I'm working to retain, but that night isn't going anywhere for me.

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In 1968, coming off the success of "Brown-Eyed Girl," Van Morrison released what is widely considered his greatest album, *Astral Weeks*. It is a mystical and enigmatic album, "as impenetrable and...majestic as the Sphinx."¹ Morrison's songs sound like mysterious dreams, making sense only as a whole package. When someone tries to analyze them individually or pick them apart in detail, they only lose clarity. It's meant to be appreciated from a distance. It is, in other words, pretty much nothing like "Brown-Eyed Girl."

Because of this, the album invites a lot of analysis. The critics' most common conclusion (one that Morrison himself has confirmed) is that this is an album about new birth, new life, new hope.² It just never makes that point directly. No one, not even Morrison, can really explain how or why the album offers up this new life.

What is inarguable, however, is that the album does offer new life. And perhaps the best way to understand this is through '60s & '70s music critic Lester Bangs. Bangs was brilliant, frequently deemed the greatest rock critic in American history. He was also something of a cantankerous man, negatively reviewing albums that others adored and eventually getting fired from *Rolling Stone* magazine for "disrespecting musicians." On Wikipedia, he describes his interview technique by saying he intentionally led his interviews with "the most insulting question I could think of."³ His adversarial style was more in line with the punk musicians he covered than with the professional journalism of his peers (and, to be clear, his peers would have also been unlikely to fawn in a review, preferring to appear more objective).

¹ Brian Hinton, *Celtic Crossroads: The Art of Van Morrison* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2000), 95.

² Ibid.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lester_Bangs

Bangs describes 1968—not a great year for America in general—as a particularly devastating low in his individual life, detailing how he foundered through days in a foggy darkness. Into his personal and the country’s wider darkness came *Astral Weeks*, what Bangs would call “a beacon, a light on the far shores of the murk.”⁴ In the grooves of this record, Bangs heard something deeply spiritual and holy, writing that Morrison’s passionate power comes more in “the feeling than in the Revealed Word” and adding “there are times when the Word seems to hover very near.”⁵ Essentially, Bangs says that he was drowning and *Astral Weeks* rescued him.

He also writes, in the same essay, that he knows he is not alone in that experience. This group of jaded, distant music critics and fans heard the singer of “Brown-Eyed Girl” and were terribly moved, inspired, and uplifted. They encountered something sacred and holy even though the songs themselves do not mention Christ or God or church and the music is not gospel. By many standards, this is not a “Christian album,” and yet the godly impact it has had on a generation of beatniks is remarkable.

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Astral Weeks has become an album that guides despite the fact that it is all over the place: it meanders, indirectly directing instead of demanding or insisting. These songs are not a spotlight, a laser pointer, or a tractor beam; they are a soft glow that entices and lures but never commands. The music’s astral light hints, assuages, and suggests. This is how we are guided by the stars. This is how we are guided by God.

Outside of this passage in Matthew, when the Bible references stars, it typically does so to reinforce one or both of two ideas. The first of these is that the God who created these celestial lights is unfathomably powerful and majestic, a God capable of both the enormity and the glorious beauty of the nighttime sky. The second of these is that humanity is fantastically puny compared to a God like this and ought to embrace the appropriate humility that comes with this realization.

Attempts to guide that come in a more dominant fashion inevitably fail to include that humility. They are often filled with bravado or arrogance, with unearned assuredness. We encounter this all the time in pundits on television, or perhaps in Facebook preachers, or maybe even in yard signs. We even encounter it face-to-face (I mean, maybe some of you are only here this morning because you have family members home for the holidays who treat you this way—family members you love dearly but, let’s be honest, needed a break from).

When we encounter this unearned assuredness—on TV, on the internet, in person—we encounter someone who insists upon speaking and doesn’t offer the opportunity to listen. News channels don’t listen, billboards don’t listen...the worst preachers I know focus more on the speaking than the listening.

The wise men listen. They have to, in order to make sense of the direction offered by the star, offered from the heavens. Like someone trying to make sense of Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks*, trying to find the meaning that comes from a place beyond the words or melodies themselves,

⁴ Bangs, Lester, “Astral Weeks,” *Stranded: Rock and Roll for a Desert Island* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1979). Available from <https://genius.com/Lester-bangs-astral-weeks-annotated>; accessed 22 December 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

the wise men have to listen carefully, diligently, exhaustively. And when they do, they hear something (or, stargazing, see something) that nudges them to take a small step...and then they listen, comprehensively, again.

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We live in a world that is used to black and white directives, one without much room for shades of grey. We have oversimplified our perceptions so that, in nearly every case, we believe that we know someone inside and out from a bumper sticker on a car or an image on a Facebook page. We believe there are only two options, one right and one wrong, and that anyone who thinks differently is a fool.

What that mindset means when it comes to getting somewhere is that we are quick to have tunnel vision. We Google the quickest or most efficient route, then we follow the blue line on our phone to get to our destination. If someone else were to point out a different route, even someone we loved and trusted who knew the way well, I suspect most of us would be loath to listen to that person over the advice our phones were giving us.

The problem, of course, is that we start to function this way with the rest of our lives as well. We assume that the path through grief is equally straightforward, or the path to falling in love, or to becoming a better person. We start to believe that God directs us in blue lines or laser pointers...and that just isn't so. God is too complex, our divine relationships too messy for us to expect the path toward God to be mapped out in 2-D or lit up like an airplane runway.

To be clear, that may happen occasionally. There is a reason why we try to cram the wise men and the shepherds into the Christmas story—we want (and should want) what they both represent and convey about the path to the infant Christ. The shepherds in Luke *do* receive a clear directive, one where the sky *is* lit up and the angels offer a pretty clear sign of what to look for. But the wise men—and most other characters throughout the gospels—do not come to Christ this way. We absolutely should not expect that our paths to the baby Jesus will be as clear cut. Instead, we must stay open to any potential path that might get us to Bethlehem.

This is especially true because we have a lot more in common with the magi than we do with the shepherds. The magi represent that Jesus comes not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. The magi were wealthy, benefitting from the greatest advantages their society had to offer. The magi were in positions of power. They were, much more so than the shepherds, us.

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I think about the night that our family walked quietly under the stars often. It was important to me, not just as time spent together with people I love deeply or as a breath of fresh air in the midst of a universal cataclysm. I felt like I was following something that night, following something good and right and beautiful.

Honestly, I couldn't tell you then where it was leading me, and I'm not even sure I could tell you now. But the stars shone brightly, and I felt a similar light as I watched my children dance in the street, and I knew a true hope in the prayer that crossed my lips as we walked. When we watch the light of the heavens with humility, with wonder, and with hope, when we listen more than we speak, God moves us...even when we do not know where we are going.