

“Light from Darkness: Looking Forward” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

The question that came to me as I read our verses for this Epiphany Sunday was “*What is the nature of the light which leads us?*” The Magi follow the light of the Star of Bethlehem, and Herod follows another kind of light - the light of earthly authority. Which light we will follow as individuals and as a community of faith can get a little tricky when we are in the middle of the conflicts, crises and concerns in our daily lives. It is easy when we are in a removed position to see what the correct choice would be for other people, but when we are in the middle of things ourselves, discernment is a skill and a challenge. I have used the analogy of a football game before: it is always easier to ‘armchair quarterback’ a game from the comfort of the easy chair in our living room than to be running the game on the field.

Our Jewish forebearers in faith have a way of thinking about these different lights we must discern in order to become a loving, functional individual and community. They speak of a *Yetzer Hara* and a *Yetzer HaTov*.

The *yetzer ha'ra* is the inclination to evil and the *yetzer hatov* is the inclination to the good. Neither inclination is inherently evil or good, but the focus of each can lead to either evil or good. So a child who grows up being allowed to give into the *yetzer ha'ra*, which is the inclination to pleasure, possession of things and the need for security, will more than likely be led into ways of evil to fulfill the pressures of the inclination. The child who is guided to fulfilling the *yetzer hatov* will marry well, be successful in business and will seek the good of the community. We can't get rid of either one- they are essential to our very being. But one can reign in the one and be guided by the other.

But, the *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to the good, is not born in a person until they are 13, which is when study of Torah and the Jewish way begins in earnest. Not coincidentally this is the time of bar and bat mitzvahs. So a child who has given in to the *yetzer ha'ra* in his or her childhood has a tremendous challenge on his or her hands when the *yetzer hatov* is born within.

Imagine with me for a moment that, among all the ways to read this story today of the Wise Ones and Herod, that it is also a story about the nature of the lights which guide us. The Roman authority and tradition is the guiding light of Herod. It is, in many ways, the outcome of a life devoted to the *Yetzer Ha'Ra*, the inclination to evil. In a simple way, *the externals* - the traditions of rulers in Rome, the entrenched interpretations of the religious authorities who report to and are governed by state authorities, the conformity of knowledge to the powers that be - *govern the internal experiences and spiritual lives of others*.

It is very difficult to live outside of those external authorities. In fact, I would say most of us prefer it. That is why it took 40 years of wandering around a desert for the Israelites to even begin to trust that God would provide, that freedom is not defined by

the external light of human authority. It is a hard horse to break. Think about the Israelites in Numbers 11.

*“Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat!5We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.6But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Numbers 11:4-6)*

This passage is an example of being overwhelmed by the *yetzer ha'ra*. It was so much easier when people just gave us stuff. It was so much easier *then*. Of course, it doesn't matter that the Israelites were enslaved and oppressed - the *yetzer ha'ra* doesn't care about that. Who, outside of me, will give me what I want?

Then we have the Magi, who are guided by the Star of Bethlehem, which is like the *yetzer ha'tov*. The *yetzer ha'tov* is that inner star which guides us into the world, the Holy Spirit who resides with each of us and becomes the inner light of Christ. This is what guides the Magi. For most of us, I think the inner guidance of that light, that *good inclination*, comes to us often as a 'minority report'. It is that still, small, mysterious voice which compels us, but is easily ignored or pushed down.

Just a few chapters after the Israelites complain about having to eat manna, after their capitulation to their *yetzer ha'ra*, a search party is sent out into the land of Canaan, the promised land. Most of the warriors who came back were terrified. They said it was a land filled with giants. Horror was everywhere. They were consumed with fear. Everyone except for two of the warriors:

*“And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes7and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land.8If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey.9Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.”10Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.” (Numbers 14:6-10)*

The *yetzer ha'tov* can easily be silenced by fear, by the unknown, by the uncomfortable and troubling. In the Jewish tradition, the training is intensive in order to strengthen and build up the inclination to the good through prayer, Scripture and moral training. The process of discernment for the presence of the *yetzer ha'tov* is not direct. It relies on mystery, hope, love, light. Paul says a similar thing in Ephesians:

*“When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” (Ephesians 3:4-6)*

The more we subject ourselves to the light of God within, the more willing we will be to follow that soft, glowing, holy light when confronted with the cloud of pleasure for its own sake, the need for things that have no real purpose and the desperate pressure for earthly security that compels so many. Then, God’s light becomes our light. We begin to see that this light had been present all the time, but we put up curtains against it, walls to keep it out and established external guards to make sure we remained in darkness.

Once we rely on the light of God, the Bright Eastern Star of Christ, Isaiah’s prophecy becomes a reality right now, not just a prophecy for the past:

*For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.  
Lift up your eyes all around, and see;  
Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and exult,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
<sup>6</sup>A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. (Isaiah 60:2, 4a, 5-6)*

Which light, then, shall we follow? What is the nature of the light which leads us?

Is it the light of human authority, the lights of the *yetzer ha’ra*, which tempt us with comfort, shiny things and wants masquerading as desperate needs and seeks all those things outside of ourselves? The trajectory of this light leads us to rely on the powers and principalities of darkness. Remember Jesus’ words, *“If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”* (Matt 6:23). Or is it the light of God and Christ which shines from within, a minority report, which calls us to love, hope, promise? Will we be the

radiance and reflected light of the one who calls himself “*the light of the world*” (Jn 1:5, 8:12)?

I want to point out just one more thing that seems important here. Notice that it is the ones “from away”, the ones who do not know the traditions well, the explorers and spiritual adventurers who recognize the light above Bethlehem for what it is. The Magi rely on hints, rumors, probabilities, mystery and hope as their guides toward the light of Christ. There are no scribes or religious authorities at the crib of the baby Jesus. And yet those scribes and religious authorities are steeped in prophecy, promise and knowledge.

Here is how my spiritual hero, Soren Kierkegaard, puts it:

*“Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah should be born, they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him. Similarly we may be able to explain every article of our faith, yet remain spiritually motionless. The power that moved heaven and earth leaves us completely unmoved.*

*What a contrast! The three kings only had a rumor to go by. But it spurred them to set out on a long, hard journey. The scribes, meanwhile, were much better informed, much better versed. They had sat and studied the scriptures for years, like so many dons. But it didn’t make any difference. Who had the more truth? Those who followed a rumor, or those who remained sitting, satisfied with all their knowledge?*  
(from Soren Kierkegaard’s *Christmas Meditation: Only A Rumor*)

As followers of Christ, as fellow travelers with the Magi, we rely on a wisdom gained from mystery and hope. We become deep listeners for the “minority report” of the light of Christ. We become strange because we follow rumors and hints of possibilities where God might show up.

Which light do you prefer? The Jewish faith says we need both lights - the *yetzer ha’ra* and the *yetzer hatov*. I believe they are right about that. The greater adventure, however, lies with the softer light, the good light, the *yetzer hatov*. This is what the Magi knew and this is why I want to follow them to the family of Christ.

As we look forward into this New Year, as Rockland Congregational Church, I invite you to follow the Bright Eastern Star of Christ, that interior light which guides us into the radiant world which God has created for us. Follow it with attention to the still, small voices, with attention to the rumors of love and hope and constructive possibility, with hints of deeper relationship and journeys with the Lord your God.

It requires prayer and focus, so let me end with Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. This is a prayer which we would benefit from memorizing. Paul prays:

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

(Ephesians 3:14-21)