

My new friends, it's so great to be back in Maine, where people strike up conversations on their way into Norma's and on their way out of the library....where auto insurance costs half of what it does in Massachusetts...and where you can look up and see the stars at night.

It may sound strange-or even impossible, but until my first night here, I'd forgotten about seeing the stars. I'm from here, but I went to college in Boston and just stayed there. Boston has tall buildings and an abundance of light pollution that obscures the stars from view. The dense population brings the sight line is much lower than the heavens. My environment had robbed me of the ability to perceive the stars. I was looking up, but not seeing what was really there.

Our Scripture passage today speaks to the manifestation or really the revelation of something special--right there—seen, but not noticed by many. The star, both a sign and a symbol. A sign is something that points the way and a symbol stands for something else. The star pointed the way to Jesus and also, symbolically, tipped us off to the fact that Jesus would be a light in the world. Unlike a moon or planet that reflect light from elsewhere, a star generates it's own light. Jesus would be a light, offering guidance, orientation, and hope to a troubled world.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the day that the wise men reached Jesus. Christmas cards and even some church sanctuaries have the manger scenes depicted with Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, a few sheep, a cow, some shepherds, and often 3 kings with treasure chests. It's a warm and fuzzy image to be sure.

But in truth, the Scripture passage that Susan just shared reads like a Dan Brown novel. It's a thriller...filled with danger, intrigue, plotting, escape, murder, good guys, bad guys, and always-always someone who sees more than the average person.

Despite what the greeting card industry would have us believe, the wise men probably didn't arrive that night...it's highly unlikely that they were kings....and there may well have been more than three of them. We use the number three because there were three types of gift: gold, frankincense and myrrh. We place them in the creche in a symbolic gesture of those outside of the Jewish faith recognizing the lordship of Jesus.

These Magi were likely astrologers and they knew when they looked up, exactly what they were looking at.

I remember walking with my aunt when I was about 6. She pointed to the ground and said, “Look, Estelle, a dollar. Pick it up!” I looked, but didn't see a dollar. “It's right there!” Where, I wondered. I looked again for a green piece of paper, maybe it had blended in with the grass. Again, she pointed. Again, I looked in bewilderment. Finally, she reached down and picked up a red piece of paper. It was Old Orchard Beach in the summertime. It was actually a Canadian \$2.00 bill! I'd seen it, but I didn't know what I was looking at.

In a similar manner, thousands, probably hundreds of thousands saw a bright star in the sky and didn't know what it meant. But the wise men knew it would lead them toward hope, healing, forgiveness, community, justice....God. The Magi felt compelled to move toward Jesus, symbolic of gentiles movement toward recognizing Jesus' importance and embracing his way.

The passage today clearly shows us those who follow the light and those who dwell in darkness. On the one hand we've got the Magi, stepping forward in faith and on the other hand, we have cruel, selfish, ignorant Herod. He doesn't know the Scriptures, doesn't want to acknowledge Jesus as king, and quickly orders infanticide of his own people to make sure that he halts any possible rival, even if that rival isn't yet even a toddler.

In a strange way, we can actually learn something from Herod. He saw the possibility of Christ in every child in town. We can learn from the Magi, who paid attention to heavenly matters and moved toward that great light.

Christ's light shines and some are drawn toward it, but others fear it because his light will dispel their own darkness. People of God, wise men (women, and children) seek him still. The real star of Bethlehem wasn't in the sky. Blessed be and amen.