

When I was the marketing director for the Alberta Ballet Company, part of my job was to travel to interesting places, show videos of the company, and try to put together a performance tour for the company with communities in that area. Basically I'd go to trade shows where sellers of performers met with buyers of performers. And typically, the same artist agents and performing companies ended up at the same trade shows. It was in this scenario that I met Margaret Branscombe a mezzo soprano, with a huge voice, who represented herself at these shows. She wanted to take her brand of opera performance on the road.

I remember Margaret asked me once when my birthday was, and what time of day I was born. She also asked if I knew that information of Sheila. After a dinner break, Margaret returned to tell me about my relationship with Sheila and what we might expect in our future. When I asked her how she knew all that, she said she used the information I gave her and read my "charts" – my astrological charts. I chuckled with reservation and no amount of discomfort because what she said rang true in my heart. I get the same feeling everytime I read the horoscopes in the newspaper, or my friend Sharon says to me, you're such a cancer.

Just this morning, Sheila called me to ask when I was born. The she phone to say...your rising sign is Aries...and then proceeded to describe me to a T. Both in my sun sign cancer and in my rising sign, the descriptions of me were bang on. Just this morning I got that same weirded out feeling I got with Margaret Branscombe.

Back in the 80's, when Margaret saw my scepticism and she told me that when she was still living at home, her father worked for Imperial Oil, leading exploratory missions off the coast of south east Asia. On more than one occasion, drilling was halted by the Chinese because the stars were not right. She said "if the Chinese can shut down the drilling operations of Imperial Oil because of the alignment of the stars, I need to know more about astrology." So she did a lot of study.

I'm reminded of Margaret everytime we read about the magi in the Christmas story, who followed the star after it appeared on the night of Jesus' birth believing it heralded the birth of a great leader – king of the Jews in Matthew's telling of the story. Before you ask me whether this is history, or sacred story, I want to tell you a couple of things. In first century Palestine, in the absence of scientific knowledge, our understanding of astronomy (the study of the stars) and our understanding of astrology (a pseudo science that draws meaning from the placement of celestial bodies) were synonymous – they were understood as being one and the same thing.

The second thing I want to say is that it was also common belief in first century Palestine that strange and wondrous things in the night sky - celestial explosions, falling stars, eclipses of the sun and moon and the like - signified a major political event of epic proportions, the birth of a king.

Was there a star? Were there wise ones in the East who followed and sought a child? Is this history being told in an effort to point to an almighty God, or is this sacred story intended as a metaphor for teaching followers of the way, something about the Spiritual life? Historically, it's not outside the realm of possibility that some kind of super nova occurred around the time of Jesus' birth. It's also not outside the realm of possibility that this particular group of mystics and astronomers believed that a star in the sky of this magnitude, marked the advent of a new and great king.

It's interesting to notice that according to the original Greek, these wise ones from the East didn't "see" a star in the east they "perceived" a star. That's what the original Greek says. Now that's a much more interesting perspective, in my mind. There was no science then, there was only tradition, mystical experience and stories remembered. Astrology and Astronomy were one and the same. So it won't surprise you to hear that I think it's way more useful to wonder what this story says than argue about whether it's historically accurate.

Magi, master star gazers, would have been as highly educated as anyone in first century Palestine. Priests and astronomers...they're the ones who got to go to school. These people would have known something about sun signs and rising signs I'm certain. And to mount such an adventure from somewhere in south east Asia to Palestine would have taken great capital - with many pack animals and servants. Highly educated, wealthy men, likely, studied the stars, saw something different, unusual, and it compelled them to follow. They could have said to one another, wow that's a bright star in the sky, must be the birth of a king somewhere. Wow. Pass the mu shu chicken. But no; they were stopped in their tracks, they prepared their caravans, and sought to follow. And when they found the young child (this journey might have taken up to two years) they fell down and worshipped him. They gave to this child their reverence; they gave shape, form, construct to that which they valued.

I was talking about this story with a colleague recently who said to me...boy those wise men must have been really needy. It was nonsensical for them to just leave everything in search of what? They didn't even really know. She nearly touched the debate about how women would have approached the journey. And she sounded pretty determined in this opinion until I reminded her of her own travels to Great Britain to get a theology degree she could have gotten right here in Canada. Something about possibility, something about the distinctiveness of this particular school compelled her to follow. And the degree that she earned gives form to that which she values.

And the difference between the Magi's response and that of King Herod and the leaders of the synagogue is remarkable. The magi saw a star, found its source and worshipped. Herod and his cohorts apparently didn't even see the star, and when they heard about its source, became frightened and vengeful. That's how it is with this Jesus of Nazareth according to the stories in Matthew's gospel. As Myrna said, there is both a calm surrender and a passionate conflict as the biblical characters come to terms with the presence of Jesus in their lives.

Except that I don't think there was anything calm about what happened to the magi. Any more than it was calm for my colleague to make the decision to go to school in England. I think a vision comes to us. I think the star they saw was not just bright and unusual. I think it disturbed them. It was likely one of those experiences that haunts you as you try to resolve your own response to it. Think of those moments in your life when you saw something, read something, heard something about which you could not stop thinking. Can you think of anything in your life that caused you to re-evaluate, re-think, re-examine so much that you stopped everything to take a different direction? When does that happen? If you have, what has been the outcome?

I think this is what it means when we decide to mess with Jesus. There is just something about what Jesus has said, as it appears to be recorded in the scriptures, something about what he seems to have done, and how he empowers others, that compels us to take a second look. His own way of being human, and his encouragement of others to be likewise, turns the world upside down. For two thousand years generations of people of bowed and worshipped – giving shape, form, construct to their values.

Maybe this is the year. Maybe more than any other year in our lives, this will be the year that the story of his birth, the stories of his ministry, the story of his death and the story of his living will compel us to drop everything and pursue our own lives with just as much passion. Maybe for some of us, it will be the first time. Maybe for some of us it will be like falling off a log, having turned our lives over to claiming our humanity as Jesus claimed his, years ago. May Spirit guide us wherever we are on this disciples' path. Amen.