

“The Fourth Wise Man” / Matthew 2:1-12 / 6 January 2012

Happy Epiphany to you. May this season be a time of serendipities, new discoveries, and well, epiphanies in your life and in our world. There are people who exchange presents not on Christmas, but on this day, which they call “Little Christmas.” It’s when we commemorate those Three Wise Men who showed up to give their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Baby Jesus. Church tradition has named those wise men Balthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior. But Matthew never says there were three of them. No, in fact, allow me to introduce myself. I am the fourth wise man, Ardshir, and my gift to the Infant Jesus was baby powder. Somebody had to get the kid a gift he could actually use. Let me tell you how that first Epiphany went down.

We wise men are Zoroastrian stargazers, prophets, soothsayers. Ours is the ancient religion of the Zodiac, but nothing like the cheap horoscopes you find in the *Post-Gazette*...and certainly not the ones in *The Trib*. (Those newspaper hacks couldn’t read the stars with *Hooked on Phonics*.) I was watching the heavens from my observatory in Persia, when there in the west, I saw a new light shining. Now, let me tell you, I know the stars, and there’s no such thing as a new one. Saying that you see a “new star” is like saying that America has a new founding father. They stopped accepting applications long ago. Occasionally an old star will go away, but new stars never rise to take their place. And so imagine my surprise when I glanced over to the west and found light—new light!—in a part of the sky that had been dark since the dawn of time. Imagine my surprise when an unexpected light flooded my observatory from a whole new angle, casting shadows in places where there had never been shadows before, sending silvery rays into corners that never see a glimmer. Imagine my surprise when I looked up to find an unearthly light, casting its new beams over all the weary world, messing with the alignment of the stars, outshining old, established stars, throwing off my Zodiac calculations, ruining the horoscope I had been writing for *The Babylonian Herald*, making me doubt the very things I know best. The stars.

Well, Magi’s Trade Union was in an uproar over that star. Some of us thought it meant the end of the world. Others said it meant a whole new beginning. Some of us trembled in the perplexing new rays of light. Some of us hid from its strange beams. Others basked in those rays and gloried in the eerie new star. Some even loaded up their camels and their finest gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, to follow that unfamiliar star.

Don’t go looking for their names in your Bible. Around here, we just called those three followers Larry, Moe, and Curly. Who but a stooge just ups and follows a new light in the sky? Who but a stooge leaves everything behind to traipse off to Israel, where being a stargazer like us can get you hurt? Ah, they almost convinced me to go along with them, and if they had, your little nativity sets would have four wise men to this day: the one who looks like he’s from India; the one who looks like he’s from Persia; the one who looks like he’s from China; and the bald one with glasses. I was ready to go, too. I decided the kid could probably use some baby powder more than any gold, or frankincense, or myrrh. But at the last minute...I decided not to go. It was all too strange. That new light in the sky gave me the willies. I didn’t want to follow it; I wanted to run from it. I wanted to hide from its spooky new beams. I wanted the night sky to go back to normal. I was afraid that star might lead someplace where I wouldn’t want to be, someplace where I wouldn’t be welcomed, with my strange ways, my strange

language, my strange religion...and my bottle of baby powder. And so, I stayed home and closed the curtains to hide me from the light.

Oh, but you know about that, don't you? You know what it is to shrink away from the light, afraid of what it might reveal, cloaking yourself in familiar darkness. You, too, have resisted the light, especially unfamiliar light, because new light changes your perspective. It undoes your way of seeing. It requires you to see and be seen anew. New light calls for new honesty about others and ourselves. It's easier to remain cloaked in comfortable shadow, but all these centuries later God is still calling us, "Come out into the light."

Light can be scary, for it reveals things that we might prefer to hide. It demonstrates truths that we might prefer not to believe. Worst of all, it makes us see ourselves in ways that aren't always flattering. I was scandalized once, long ago, when I heard a preacher say that God is like a lover. Yes, a lover. God is always saying, "Give yourself to me, all of you! Show yourself to me. Don't hide." And we're forever saying to God, "Let's just keep the lights down low. Don't look at me. I'm ugly. I'm flabby. I'm weak. Don't look." And yet, God bids us, "No, I love you, all of you. I love your blemishes, and your skinny legs, and your oversize gut. I love your scars. Don't try to hide yourself from me." Years ago, I thought that analogy was very out-of-place in a church. And yet, it's true. We hide from the light, and as much as we hunger for deep intimacy with God, as much as we yearn for the peace of mind, and the sense of direction, and deep inner calm that only intimacy with God can afford us, as much as we are drawn to the light, we are forever rushing around closing doors, and dimming the lights, and drawing the curtains. As much as we long for intimacy with God, we are always making it impossible with all our fearful hiding. And the strangest thing of all is this: We try to hide the things that God already knows. We also try to hide from other people, despite our desire to be in relationship with them. Strangely, we try to hide even from ourselves because there are things we don't want to know about us. Being known: It's one of our deepest drives, but it's also our profoundest fear.

In his book, *Life among the Lutherans*, Garrison Keillor agrees that the wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—and, he says, everyone knows that myrrh is a kind of casserole made with hamburger and noodles. Keillor says that, as the wise men were packing up to follow the Star of Bethlehem, one of them was approached by his wife. She said, "They'll be hungry, so take this myrrh...but be sure to bring back the dish." Myrrh seems like an odd gift for a baby, but when that strange new light calls us out of our habitual places, we come bearing whatever gifts we have.

What is the unexpected (and perhaps unwelcome) new light that has recently appeared in the skies above your life? What new star is shedding its pale rays over the old things that you thought you knew so well, casting them in a new light, showing you angles and perspectives that you've never seen before? Is there a new insight that you're resisting, a new phase of life that you're putting off, a new hope that you just don't want to risk? I'm almost certain that there is. The Spirit is always sending new stars into our night skies. Everything that we cherish now was new and strange at one time; there's wisdom in risking the light. There are new solutions to old problems, new vision for old eyes, new love, new forgiveness, new life. Today is a day for following stars. In the end, believe me, you rarely regret the risks that you took for the sake of the light. But you might regret turning away, pulling the curtains tight, and never following after that new

star. Take it from me, Ardshir, the forgotten wise man, the one who was scared of the light. Anybody need some baby powder? Amen.