

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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Looking to the Stars

I've never been big on astrology. I don't know the various signs or the months they are associated with. I'm actually a bit surprised I even know my own sign, I'm a Taurus if you were wondering. But, maybe I shouldn't be, surprised that is, because my mother was interested in astrology or at least horoscopes. And she did know the signs, or at least she knew hers, mine and my Dad's (he and I shared one). As she would read them each and every morning. And, while I don't actually think she took all that much stock in the horoscopes, she most certainly looked to the stars each and every day. As she reached every morning for the paper, dawning her fluffy white terrycloth robe, a warm cup of coffee in her hand, with the Washington Post spread across her lap and opened to the daily horoscopes. It apparently began because, as I was told, she had taken her lead from Nancy Regan. But, I believe it continued because it gave her a connection, maybe to something other worldly, maybe to something in the future, or maybe simply to the people around her. As I would call and anxiously fretting over something coming up, she might casually remark about how my horoscope could give me ease, having had read that good things were in my future. Or as my father would go on about something that had happened, she might note how it aligned with his horoscope for that morning. It wasn't serious of course, it was just fun, maybe even silly, but most of all it connected us in a meaningful way. A way that reminded you that someone cared about you, and the course of your life, someone like a mother, or maybe like the Divine.

Today, as we celebrate the Epiphany, we are introduced to a group of individuals who were also interested in reading the stars. Although, I would assume, they took it much more seriously, than my mother (maybe even more so than Nancy Regan). As we hear the story of the Magi, our wise men traveling from the east. Who looked up to the stars in order to determine how to live and move and have their being in this world. And, who were led by those same stars to that small humble town called Bethlehem, and that lowly manger which held the baby Jesus. All in order that they might pay the savour of our world homage. And while we only have a mere 12 verses from within the entirety of our four gospel books speaking to the Magi's visit, their story has been one of the most deeply revered, artistically interpreted, and historically celebrated events from the life of Jesus. It is only in recent history that this day has taken a backseat to Christmas. Because while much is unknown about these "three kings" of which we can't even confirm if there were even only three, what we do know is that they were all somehow brought together from far away lands, distant communities, and exotic religions to gather together and bend their knees to the one whom they believed was Divinely ordained to be the King of the Jews. For no other reason than that they looked to the stars, and saw something of the miraculous in the heavens, which they believed was being worked out by God here on earth.

For Christmas this year my Father gave me a book of Poetry by a modern day mystic Chelan Harkin. As he flipped through the pages of the book, my Dad told me, "she has little bits of brilliance scattered throughout." Pointing out a few poems, one of which struck me as so very wise and necessary for anyone who has ever looked to the stars. Entitled, "The Worst Thing" the poet Chelan Harkin writes:

The worst thing we ever did
Was put God in the sky
Out of reach,

Pulling the divinity
From the leaf,
Sifting out the holy from our bones,
Inisting God isn't bursting dazzlement through everything
We've made

A hard commitment to see as ordinary,
Stripping the sacred from everywhere
To put in a cloud man elsewhere,
Prying closeness from your heart.

The worst thing we ever did
Was take the dance and the song
Out of prayer
Made it sit up straight
And cross its legs
Removed it of rejoicing
Wiped clean its hip sway
Its questions
Its ecstatic yowl
Its tears.

The worst thing we ever did is pretend God isn't the easiest thing
In this universe
Available to every soul
In every breath.

Too often, I think, we put God, religion, and even spirituality in a box. Or as Harkin says, in the sky. We put God in places we can't reach. We say "it is this way," or no way at all. We make it all other worldly, when in fact the Divine is right here among us, in each and every aspect of our seemingly mundane lives. The Epiphany, in my mind, is a reminder that we cannot put God in the sky, maybe in a manger, but certainly not somewhere out of reach. Because God is beyond even our own conceptions of whatever we have boxed in as true faith. Which God points out as the Divine takes the stars in the heavens and allows them to speak truth to the Magi from the east. Or as God pokes holes in the veil between this world and the next and allows the Angel's to proclaim "good news of great joy" to Mary in person and to Joseph in his dreams. Or maybe even as God lies meek and mild in an animal's feeding trough, wailing for food as the Divine feels the pains of hunger, and coos with joy as he is snuggled within the warmth of his mother's embrace.

As we enter this new year, still in that fresh space of only a week into this two thousand and twenty fourth year, how will we find the Divine within our midst, and bring God down from that lofty, far away sky, back into our midst? Will we look to the stars, like the Magi, so that we might first remember God is here? Or, maybe to our horoscope, like my mother, so that we might find something that grounds us both to the Divine and to one another? Or might we simply turn to our breath, like the poet Chelan Karkin, connecting with the One who first breathed life into us in the beginning? Or, even to a star word, which I have up here, a word to guide your coming year like the Magi were guided by their star, finding ways to lead them closer to God. Or like my mother was guided by hers, using something a bit frivolous but completely fun! Either way, I encourage, whether through a star word, a new daily ritual, or just a pause for breath, to remember God is right here all around us, waiting to be found in our moments of peace alone, our interactions with one another, and everywhere else in between.