

The Second Sunday after Christmas Day  
January 2, 2011 ~ Matthew 2: 1-12  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *"It Was in the Stars."*

**I**t would be hard to overestimate the power of symbols to convey what is often profound meaning, and evoke a significant response from whomever is observing them. Perhaps the more common symbols are words, whether written or spoken, and a brief story will help you see what I mean.

A man was walking through the local shopping mall. He decided to take the escalator up to the next floor. When he got to the escalator, he noticed a warning sign, that read: "Dogs must be carried on the escalator." The man stopped and began to worry, even become a bit anxious, as he looked around and wondered, "Where am I going to find a dog?"

Our gospel reading tells us about another type of symbol, and it begins as follows:

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."*

Obviously, the symbol being described was the star which the "wise men from the East" had observed and followed.

I was interested to learn that, in those days, stars were powerful symbols, and there were men who made it their career to study the position and movement of stars and planets. They were looking for interesting and unusual movements of the stars and planets, because they thought such unusual astral events could forecast unusual earthly events.

One observer saw something interesting, and this is what was noted:

*During the years 5 BC to 2 BC, on the first day of the Egyptian month of Messori (i.e., mid-August), the star, Sirius, rose with the dawn, and shone with extraordinary brilliance — almost like a second sun. What makes this really interesting is the fact that the name of the month of Messori comes from Mes-en-ra, an Ancient Egyptian word that means either "Birth of the Sun" or "Birth of a Prince."*

However, if you're like me, you might question the accuracy of such ancient observations. However, modern scientists and astronomers can recreate models of what the night sky actually looked like on virtually any day in our past. The following was observed from one of these models:

*On August 12<sup>th</sup> of 3 BC, there occurred an alignment of Venus and Jupiter — the two planets lined up so as to look like one, and the light from the two was significant. This alignment took place near the star Regulus, and within the constellation of Leo. This same alignment occurred again [ten months later] on June 17<sup>th</sup> of 2 BC.*

To an observer living in those days, such an event would definitely have been observed, and it would have been pregnant with meaning for three reasons. First, Leo was the tribal sign of Judah. Second, Jupiter was viewed as the patriarch of the planets, and Venus the matriarch. Third, the ancient name for Regulus was *Sharru*, which means “the king.” When you put all this together, what you have are stars acting as a symbol, predicting that a king would be born in Judah. And the response this symbol evoked from those who observed it was belief — but not just a belief as in “I believe this will happen,” but a belief as in “Let’s go to Judah and pay homage to this new king.”

The words we find in Holy Scripture can also be intensely symbolic, and evocative. In his novel, *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky tells a story of two criminals. The first criminal is a depressed but intelligent young man, Raskolnikov, who believes that all morality is man-made and should only apply to the lower classes, and not to someone as superior as himself. To prove his theory, he murders a destitute old woman. He reasons that such murder is not a moral issue because the woman is worthless. However, he is nonetheless overcome by an overwhelming guilt that his rational mind cannot come to terms with.

The second “criminal” is a young woman named Sonya, who has turned to a life of prostitution in order to support her starving family. In contrast to Raskolnikov, Sonya seems almost naive. She has a simple and innocent belief in God — “God will save us all,” she claims — and her most prized possession is her Bible.

One day, Raskolnikov meets Sonya. He is, at the same time, enchanted with her naivete, but angered by her faith. In one scene, he insists that she read to him from Scripture. Sonya doesn’t want to because it’s such a personal thing for her to do, but she agrees anyway, and picks the story of the raising of Lazarus by Jesus. As she reads the story, her voice grows louder until, finally, at the story’s climax, she proclaims her own faith when she reads: “...and they believed on Him.”

They believed. Dostoevsky then writes, “The candle-end had long been flickering out in its crooked holder, dimly illuminating, in this beggarly little room, the murderer and the harlot, who had so strangely come together to read the Eternal Book.”

It’s a wonderful little scene which conveys the sense of how words — and especially the words contained in what Dostoevsky describes as “the Eternal Book,” the Bible — can transport us to new places, and new understandings. And it’s a scene that, in some measure, describes what we do in this place, week after week. Like like Sonya and Raskolnikov, sometimes we come as broken souls in need of faith. We come, seeking some truth that is larger than ourselves.

But there can be a certain tension in our seeking: We want to be noticed by God, and yet often we’re afraid that God will actually notice us. We desire God, yet we hide from God. And so, sometimes, like Sonya and Raskolnikov, we own a faith we cannot give ourselves over to. We see the star, but we cannot make our feet carry us towards it.

That’s why this time of the year is so important to so many. It’s a time when the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany seem to merge together, and become pregnant with symbolism. Sometimes it’s the Advent promise that gets our attention. At other times it’s the child in the manger that we see. And, sometimes, it’s the star. But all those images, all those symbols, are pointing beyond themselves, and trying to direct our attention away from our lives and this world, and toward something bigger and better.

And what they’re trying to communicate is this: For some unknown reason, God chooses to reach through time and space, and into this world, to save us. To give himself completely to us. To love us. To love ... us! And the response these symbols hope to evoke from us is belief.

And so we come, each week, to this place as seekers. And we hear our stories in the stories read from the “Eternal Book,” the Bible. And in our mind’s eye we see the images, the symbols, which evoke from us this response: “I believe.”

And so, each week we stand and recite these words: “I believe in God the Father ... I believe in Jesus Christ, his Son our Lord ... I believe in the Holy Spirit.” These words, from our Creed, are not meant to be words which we merely speak; they are also meant to be a sort of platform upon which we stand.

The English word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, which not only means “I believe,” but also “I give myself over to.” And so, when we recite the Creed, we are not only saying that we believe in God, but also that we are giving ourselves over to God, because we so desperately need God.

We give ourselves over to God as Father, not simply because we can *imagine* God as Father, as source, but because sometimes we desperately *need* God to be our source. We give ourselves over to Jesus Christ, because we sometimes *need* God to be our Savior. And we give ourselves over to Holy Spirit, because sometimes we *need* to feel the breath of life.

Now, I'm going to say something, but I want you to think about it before you decide how to react to it. It does not matter so much whether you believe literally in God as Father, or God as Mother, or God as Creator. What does matter is that, once you believe, you give yourself over to God.

Some people will think that those who follow stars are on a fool's errand, but they will be wrong. Some people will think that your faith in God is misplaced, but they also will be wrong. For, sometimes, faith is less about what you think you believe, and more about what you are willing to do, and who you are willing to trust. And a faith like this is not only life-giving, it is also life-affirming. For the God you sometimes fear most, is waiting in love, and with open arms, for you.

And so, dare to believe. Dare to follow that star. Dare to give yourself over to the Undefinable One, and, at long last, dare even to find new life. Amen.