“Drawn to the Sacred”

Matthew 2:1-12

Did you know that some of the most popular Christmas songs were not written by Christians? Here are some examples:

“Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire” by Mel Torme

“Let it Snow” by Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne

“Santa Baby” by Joan Javits and Phil Springer

“It’s The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” by George Wyle and Eddie Pola

“Silver Bells” by Ray Evans and Jay Livingston

 “White Christmas” by Irving Berlin

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” by Johnny Marks

“Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” by Johnny Marks

“A Holly, Jolly Christmas” by Johnny Marks

“Silver and Gold” by Johnny Marks

 “Walkin’ In a Winter Wonderland” by Felix Bernard and Richard B. Smith

It is interesting to see so many songs written by people who don’t necessarily believe in Jesus. Of course, there are many theories as to why Jewish composers would write Christmas songs, but the one I have heard recently was from an article by David Lang in the New York Times, “The cynics among us may think that these artists make Christmas music because they’re chasing the market. I believe there is something deeper at work. The market and the money are there because the audience is there, and the culture is there. These artists are all alpha communicators; it is their deep connection to their audiences that make them such important pillars of our shared, cultural community. If most of the country and much of the world are celebrating something, it is hard for them not to feel the pull of being there, too.”

There is something universal about our longing for the sacred. Even though our religious practices and beliefs may differ from one another, there is a deep longing in our hearts for the transcendent.

That was the longing which led the Magi to seek to find the baby Jesus. We do not know how many Magi came to visit. We do not know exactly where they came from. But what we do know is that they were outsiders to the faith of Israel. They were from another race and another faith. They did not belong to Israel’s fold. They were most likely people of the Spirit because they made the connection between their astrology knowledge and the birth of a new spiritual leader. They made a long journey just to be in the presence of a child because of their heightened sense of the sacred in life. They also did not go back to report to Herod where they found the child because they received a dream warning them not to do that. Just like Joseph in this story, the wise men had access to God and to revelation. Their connection with God was just as good as the one an insider had. Their part in the story was so significant that it got a place in the story of Jesus as told in the Gospel of Matthew. This Gospel is unique in the way it connects the story of Jesus to the history of Israel but also to those who were considered outsiders. Everyone belongs in this story. According to this Gospel, the story of Jesus tells us that that God’s love is inclusive of all and not just those who came from a Jewish background. The early church struggled with this issue because there were claims that only Jews could be followers of Jesus. If anyone wanted to be part of that community, they had to follow the rules and traditions of Judaism. That is why the presence of the wise men is essential in this story. It affirms for us that God’s love is not limited to one religion or one race of people.

Let’s listen to Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise menfrom the East came to Jerusalem, **2**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.” **3**When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4**and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.**5**They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

**6**‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
    are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
    who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

**7**Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8**Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” **9**When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.**10**When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11**On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12**And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is a strong reminder for us of us that the birth of Jesus was an experience of epiphany and revelation not just to Israel but to all nations because our connection to the sacred is not just for a small group of people. It is for the entire world. God’s vision for deep peace and love in our world is not something that is limited to a certain race or religion. It is a universal vision of love and connection.

Sometimes we limit ourselves when we look for the sacred in the expected places and ways. We may forget that God’s presence is about getting in touch with our inner longing for the sacred no matter where it may lead us.

I have had my fair share of discussions with people who think that their way of understanding Jesus is the only way to God’s heart. I used to try to argue with them by telling them about the many scripture stories where Jesus encountered people of different religions without trying to convert them to his religion. But after years of finding this approach to be ineffective, I have discovered a simpler approach. On a good day when I am grounded in God’s love, I find myself interested in people’s experiences of the sacred. I long to hear about how God has become real in their lives. I have also become more willing to share my own experiences of the sacred and my deep longing for that wholeness that can only come when we experience the divine.

I now also realize that when people assert that their religion or their way of experiencing God is the only way, it is only one of the many manifestations of our need for certainty as if we can really fully control or understand God. There are many ways we seek to fulfill our hunger for the sacred: Control, esteem, power, security, and certainty. But unless we experience the sacred on a regular basis, we will never find inner peace.

In her book, *Holy Envy,* Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “To discover that your faith is one among many –that there are hundreds of others that have sustained millions of people for thousands of years, and that some of them make a great deal of sense--that can rock your boat, especially if you have thought yours was the only one on the sea. If your faith depends on being God's only child, then the discovery that there are others can lead you to decide that someone must be wrong-- or that everyone belongs, which means that no religion, including yours, is the entire ocean… I asked God for religious certainty, and God gave me relationships instead. I asked for solid ground, and God gave me human beings instead--strange, funny, compelling, complicated human beings---who keep puncturing my stereotypes, challenging my ideas, and upsetting my ideas about God, so that they are always under construction. I may yet find the answer to all my questions in a church, a book, theology, or practice of prayer, but I hope not. I hope God is going to keep coming to me in authentically human beings who shake my foundations, freeing me to go deeper into the mystery of *why we are all here*.”

Every moment of our lives has the potential to be an epiphany, an experience of the sacred. The key is to allow ourselves to be drawn to the sacred, just like the Magi were. If you pay attention this year, something you will experience will be an important clue for you of the presence of God. For the Magi, it was the stars which they studied and knew very well. For you, it will be through some of the familiar elements and people of your life. I invite you to consider one or two of the following reflective questions to use as a daily or weekly practice to help you pay attention to the presence of God in your life. These come from Margaret Silf’s book *Close to the Heart.*

1. Who has brought God’s love to you this week?
2. Which stories this week have shown you what God is like?
3. Where did you experience God this week through one of God’s creatures?
4. What has gone wrong for you this week, and has it shown you anything about God’s ways of working in your life?

Finally let us pray in a poet’s words- Macrina Wiederkehr:
Creator of the Stars; God of Epiphanies
You are the Great Star; You have marked our paths with light
You have filled our sky with stars naming each star
Guiding it until it shines into our hearts
Awakening us to deeper seeing
New revelations  . . . And brighter epiphanies! Amen.