

**Shine On Star**  
**Christmas Eve, 2009**  
**Larry Reimer and Sandy Reimer**

**Larry:** In Gainesville, with all our lights at night and our beautiful tree cover, it's easy for us to have a reduced sense of the stars. Any time I can get outside to an open sky on a clear night, whether it's in the mountains, on the Prairie, at the lake or by the ocean, I love to pause and look at the stars. They are mysterious, even revelatory, and they touch a common power in our spirits that breaks the boundaries of religious and cultural differences.

**Sandy:** The author Madeline L'Engle tells of one of her oldest, primal memories, when she was just a toddler. Her family had gathered for vacation at their house on Jacksonville Beach. The adults were outside on a sparkling night with stars blazing over the ocean. Someone had the insight to say, "Let's go get the baby." Madeline still embraces that awareness of being carried out from her crib to see the universe of shining stars.

Ever since, she has celebrated stars, even developing a star ritual with her own children. Madeline would take them outside at twilight with those long plastic toy horns to watch for the stars to come out. As the children spotted an appearing star, they would sound their horn until they were a family of continuously honking star-welcomers.

**Larry:** Madeline's story reminds me of that opening scene of Alex Haley's Roots in Gambia West Africa in 1750, where Omorro takes his newborn son out under the stars, holds him high over his head and names him Kunte Kinte. It's a scene echoed in the opening of Disney's "Lion King."

Some Native American tribes believe that each star represents an ancestor who has died. I love to look at the stars and think of my parents, my grandparents, and generation to generation beyond.

And of course there's wishing on a star, as in "*Star light, star bright (say it with me) I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight.*" Stars are universal symbols that touch a spiritual longing in all people.

Which brings us to the story of the star over Bethlehem. You heard it read again tonight: how the star in the East led the Magi on a long journey until it stopped over the stable in Bethlehem where the baby Jesus was born. Now there are endless theories of what this moving star might have been and why it was in the heavens on that night. Some think it could have been a comet; others suggest it was a conjunction of planets appearing together; or perhaps it was a supernova, an exploding star; some even suggest a UFO. While this is fun to think about, none of the theories accounts for a group of Magi who follow the path of a star on camelback camels to Jerusalem, consult with Kings and prophets about a special birth, and then follow that same star on to Bethlehem where it stops, hanging over one specific stable.

When we think about the star that way, we adults tend to think that we only have two choices: the story is either fact or fable. When we were children, we didn't worry about all this. We just loved the Christmas stories. I, for one, enjoyed galloping our plaster of Paris Christmas crèche wise men on camels across the living room carpet over and over again to make it to the stable before the star disappeared.

**Sandy:** Two of our favorite biblical authors, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, remind us that we have a third option, beyond fact or fable – and that third option is that these stories are parables. Like all stories, in parables, something happens. This is true of all of Jesus' parables: a man searches for treasure in a field, a woman puts leaven in flower, a woman searches for a lost coin, a Samaritan helps a traveler who was attacked by the side of the road.

When these stories were told in Biblical times, people were not trying to prove that they happened. Instead, people were trying to figure out what the stories meant, what spiritual truth they conveyed. And we too would be wise to follow the wisdom of Native American tradition which says, "I do not know if this story actually happened this way, but I do know that this story is true." So let's look at three spiritual truths that we find in this story.

Here's the background for the first truth. The star and the Magi appear only in the Gospel of Matthew. Magi, translated into English as Wise Men, is the root from which we get the word Magician. These were not Magicians as we know them. Instead they were religious figures who had a secret wisdom, a connection with truth beyond every day reality. Some were astrologers in the sense that they paid attention to what were considered signs in the heavens. But mostly, they were people with a more than earthly wisdom. Most importantly, they were from the East. They were gentiles, not Jews, which meant that they were outsiders.

The star is a sign of a momentous and spiritual event, the power of light over darkness. And by pairing the star with the Magi, the outsiders from the East, the gospel of Matthew shows us the first truth that the star, God's light, is not just for some people, not just for a single nation, but for all people. As John Shelby Spong says, "a star shines over the entire world, across all boundaries. We are reminded in this story of the way God calls us to be, not divisive and exclusive, but instead increasingly welcoming and inclusive as individuals, as a church, as a national and world community. Spiritual truth and vision come not only from within our own tribe, but from other peoples and far away stars as well.

**Sandy:** The second truth of this story reminds us that tonight, it is time to stop. Remember the words we heard: "*There ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that it had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.*" So let us pause in this moment. There is nothing more we can do to make Christmas happen. We don't have to do

anymore spiritual preparation. And, unless we are morbidly multi-tasking in this moment, we're neither wrapping presents nor texting Christmas messages to our friends right now in this service.

So stop as the Magi did when the star stopped over the place of the infant's birth. Pause to hear the angels sing, to contemplate the Word of God become flesh among us and within us. Stop long enough to let the holy be born in you. Experience in your own way this light, the light that the darkness can never overcome. This is the evening to move into stillness and sing "Silent Night". There aren't many moments in the bible when everything stands still, so cherish this one and, as the scripture says, be overwhelmed with joy. Stop and let joy break forth in your own Christmas tonight, tomorrow, this next week – wherever you are, whoever you are with.

You know the terror alert levels that the department of homeland security keeps broadcasting at airports, which currently is at high or orange? What if you raised your own joy alert level one color and brought it up a notch in others around you?

**Larry:** Third, let us remember that the time will come when we are called to move on. In good Biblical tradition, that time is signaled by Epiphany Sunday, which is January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Don't rush off to slay any dragons tomorrow, but do know that our journeys will continue as we, like the Magi, are called to move on, perhaps even to go by another way. There will be much to do to bring light to so many places of darkness. Rabbi Abraham Heschel says that stars link us with the truth our ancestors found in hard times. Their importance is that the light of those stars shone through dark and dangerous times in the past and will shine through dark and dangerous times for us tomorrow. We will be called to carry on that light to all those places where infants of every form still suffer unprotected. God whose name is justice will call us forward again. Keep this peace to strengthen you for that next call.

**Sandy:** Tonight the gift is so clearly given. It's as if the simple birth, the baby in a manger, the shepherds and angels were not enough to get our attention, that God went ahead and hung a star over all of it, a star that is multiplied and hung again every night lest we forget the most precious gift of all – the imperishability of God's love for us.

Shine on star – shine on us tonight – as we wish "Starlight – Starbright – Christmas star I see tonight – I wish the radiance of God's love and grace to shine within me and within all peoples to bring peace in all manner of ways in this world." Sometimes, says Frederic Buechner, wishing is the wings the truth comes true on and sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it."

Merry Christmas!