

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” Matthew 2:1-2

I went to visit my parents this week and while I was away the Fed Ex man left two big boxes on our back porch. I hadn't ordered anything, so I called Joan to see if she had ordered something, and she hadn't. There's nothing more exciting than coming home to two big boxes, so I carried them into the house and sat them on the kitchen table and tried to guess from the weight and label what they might be. You don't want to just open them up. You want to draw out the excitement a bit. Let your imagination run free.

Sam came downstairs and asked what was in the boxes. I told him I wasn't sure. We have a pendulum clock in our living room that ticks really loud and I heard the tick and worried for a minute I might have carried a bomb into the house. I had gotten a hateful e-mail from someone the week before and thought he might have mailed me a bomb. I thought of calling up my neighbor Brian to see if he wanted to open the boxes, but then it occurred to me it was just the clock, so I went ahead and opened them.

It was two boxes of books, sent from a publisher wanting me to pass them around to my friends and talk them up, which I won't be doing, because of their genre, which I was unfamiliar with, but is apparently all the rage—the Young Vampire Lovers genre. It said on the spine that it was fiction, as if there were any doubt. I closed my eyes, opened the book, and put my finger on a random sentence and it read, "She had the power to make a person's insides erupt in flames, burning the poor soul from the inside out." Well, that's nothing new. Sam said Taco Bell had that same effect on him. Sixty copies of that literary masterpiece, which I carried out to the curb on recycling day.

Growing up, I had a buddy who believed in vampires. We'd go camping in the woods and he'd stay up all night, keeping the fire going to ward off the vampires. He asked me if I believed in vampires.

"I'll believe it when I see it," I told him.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever seen God?" he asked.

I told him to stop confusing me.

But I've been thinking about that this week, how if it's true that some things can't be believed until they're seen, is it also true that some things must be believed to be seen.

And I thought of those wise men seeing the star over Bethlehem, and wondering if everyone saw it. Or if maybe they saw the star because they watched for it with eyes that believed.

Scholars are unsure about the historical accuracy of the story of the wise men. It's only found in one gospel, the Gospel of Matthew. Biblical scholars judge the credibility of Bible stories the same way my family judges the accuracy of family stories. If only one of us remembers something the others don't, it probably didn't happen. Some scholars believe this story was created to demonstrate the universal appeal of Jesus. The wise men came from the East, a land of other nations and other religions, so Matthew might have been saying, "Look at Jesus, even the wisdom seekers from other lands and religions acknowledge him."

So I don't know if this story is historically true or not, and it doesn't matter to me. I like it because I like any story that demonstrates a largeness of spirit toward other religious traditions—the wise men were clearly not Hebrews yet they were honoring a Hebrew child, and they came with lavish gifts, so there is a spirit of generosity present in this story. That is no small thing. When we see such animosity directed against people of other faiths today, it's encouraging to read a story that emphasizes not just grudging tolerance, but generous appreciation, toward people of other faiths. I hope this appreciation is catching.

Let me point out one other dimension of this story I find helpful, if I may.

Perhaps the wise men noticed the star because they had cultivated lives of awareness. Some people don't believe until they see. Other people see because they believe, because they have cultivated their capacity for awareness.

These are the people who see goodness in humanity, because they believe in the goodness of humanity.

They are the people who are aware of the beauty in the world, because they believe the world is beautiful.

They are the people who look at the sky and see beyond the stars, because they believe that in addition to what they can see, lies much more they can't see. So they seek, they imagine, they explore.

They don't wait to believe until they can see, they see because they believe, because they have cultivated their capacity for awareness.

You will have to decide how to go through life, blind to promise and potential, or open to it.

The world looked at Zacchaeus and saw a traitor and fraud, but Jesus believed in Zacchaeus's potential for generosity. Because he believed a man could change, that is what he saw.

The world looked at a Samaritan and saw a heretic and an enemy, but Jesus believed in his potential for goodness and decency. Because he believed a Samaritan could be virtuous, that is what he saw.

The world looked at a woman at a well and saw depravity, but Jesus believed in her longing for relationship. Because he believed a woman had a capacity for love, that is what he saw.

How do you go through life? Do you have to see before you can believe? Or can you believe, and in your believing, see goodness and beauty the world cannot?