

In the Shadow of a Star  
Isaiah 60:1-6, 11 and Matthew 2:1-12 (Women's Lectionary version)  
Star Sunday

Many of you may be familiar with the classic "B.C." comic strip, which has been nationally syndicated for 65 years (since 1958), despite the fact that it is not found in our local Republic newspaper. For the strip, creator Johnny Hart drew cavemen and anthropomorphic animals because, he said, cavemen were "a combination of simplicity and the origin of ideas."

The strip became increasingly religious as it progressed through the years, and Hart began referring to the strip as his "ministry" – intended to mix religious themes with secular humor. Because of this, the strip was sometimes found in the religious news section of the paper, instead of the "Sunday funnies." Hart's grandsons, Mason and Mick Mastroianni, have sustained the comic strip since Hart's death in 2007.

Take a look at this comic strip, drawn in 1992 by Johnny Hart himself, on the slide.

In the first frame, the cavemen, philosophical Peter (the blond) and naïve, red-headed, B.C., are walking across a wasteland, the night sky in the background, and what appears as a shadow of a cross, casting its long shadow in four directions on their path.

B.C. looks back over his shoulder and asks, "Hey, did you see that?"

"See what?" says Peter.

The next frame shows them both looking back at a bright star twinkling on the horizon, reaching in four directions, toward earth and sky, and left and right.

"That star made a shadow," says B.C.

"Don't be ridiculous," chides Peter. "The only way it can do that, is if something brighter than the star is behind the star!"

"Like what?" asks B.C.

"A sun, maybe," Peter responds.

In the last frame, B.C. ponders, "A son?" and in his pondering, Peter's eyes widen as he understands B.C. to have answered "a son (S-O-N)," rather than "a sun (S-U-N)." Peter and B.C. continue their trek in the shadow of the star.

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The only way a star can make a shadow is if something even brighter is behind it.

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Shadows are pretty simple to understand. Except in the case of Peter Pan, whose shadow was nonconforming, misbehaving, and rambunctious, shadows are generally pretty cooperative and fall in line – they are not known to be adventuresome or bold. Shadows follow a predictable pattern of behavior, and they have a known cause. Merriam Webster defines “shadow” as “a dark shape that appears on a surface when someone or something moves between the surface and a source of light.”

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The B.C. comic strip brings to mind the star of Bethlehem. The cavemen are standing in the shadow of a star which casts itself in the shape of a cross. The point is – something brighter than the star is behind the star – it is not a sun (S-U-N) beaming brightly from the sky – it is the son (S-O-N) of God: Jesus, the Christ. A shadow of a star is cast upon the earth in the birth and appearing of Jesus.

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Over the years, astronomers have made several attempts to link the Star of Bethlehem to unusual celestial events, such as a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus, a comet, or a supernova. We have long been fascinated with this very curious star – a star so powerful that it illumines the world. A star so intriguing that ancient sages from the East would travel long distances to reverence the newborn king of the Judeans. A star so wondrous that those same sages would rejoice with exuberant joy when it stopped. A star so powerful that Herod was left shaking in fear, his kingship threatened.

As people of faith, we don’t need a plausible scientific explanation for what created the star the sages followed. As Christians, we acknowledge that we do stand in the shadow of the star of Bethlehem. The son of God – Jesus, the Christ – casts the shadow.

What kind of son is he? Someone enough like us that we can identify with him. Enough different, that we have much to strive for, as we attempt to follow in his footsteps.

Jesus is enough like us that he came to live among us as a human child of humble beginnings, yet unique enough that he was visited by sages who traveled a far distance to see this special child.

We know the whole story. We are insiders. We are in on the secret. We know the babe born in the manger is the Christ. And we know...we have learned...we have experienced: Christ’s light is so bright and so brilliant, that Jesus casts a large shadow across our lives.

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Behind the star of Bethlehem is the adult Jesus who demonstrates how to love and how to act and how to pray.

Behind the star of Bethlehem is the Christ, after whose example we Christians are to model our lives.

Behind the star of Bethlehem is God’s son who sacrificed himself for our benefit.

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Today, on this Star Sunday, we have each received – as a gift from our young children – a star with a word on it. Throughout the year ahead, we have each been asked to meditate, pray, and reflect upon this word. To take it to heart. To use it as a guide. This star word is to cast a shadow on our whole year, 2023.

If you have been living into this Star Sunday tradition for a number of years, my guess is that some years your star word is a perfect fit. It just clicks. It makes sense. The word really does summarize your entire year into a nice, neat package, complete with a bow on top.

Other years...perhaps you received a word that didn’t connect with you. It didn’t resonate. In those years, you probably didn’t feel like you got as much out of the star word experiment.

I encourage you this time around to see your star word as B.C. saw the shadow of the star. Look beyond the word to see that the son (S-O-N) is behind it: Jesus Christ himself. Christ’s influence is so bright and so brilliant, that it is behind your word, casting a shadow on your life.

Perhaps that image will change how you perceive your word. And perhaps it will not. But in any case, we know that the only way a star can make a shadow is if something even brighter is behind it.

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Let us pray:

Thank you, Jesus, for shining brightly in our lives. As we allow our star words to guide us throughout the year, help us to recognize your power and prominence behind them, casting a shadow on our lives. Amen.