

***“Rising Star”***  
***Salem United Methodist Church***  
***Matthew 2: 1-12; Isaiah 60: 1-6***  
***January 5, 2014***  
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When we hear the words “Rising Star,” two things may come to mind: celebrities and the stars in the night sky. In regards to celebrities, they rise to star fame basically two different ways. The first way is through talent scouts who seek someone who has the potential to become star quality talent. When they have found this person then they arrange for grooming and training to fine tune their natural talents into star quality ones. The second way is for those who think they have star talent and want to rise to star fame may hire managers, publicists, and trainers to groom, mentor, and promote them. No matter how a celebrity star is discovered there is much hard work involved to become a rising star. And some never make it.

In regards to the rising stars in the night sky, they don’t need to be groomed or trained into stardom. Scientifically speaking we know that some stars are suns which produce light by burning huge amounts of energy. Their light takes thousands of light-years to reach our tiny planet. Some stars are actually planets in our own solar system that reflect the light from our own sun. Whether it is light from the burning of a sun or reflected light from our sun, stars create beauty as they penetrate with pin pricks of light through the velvety dark canvas of the black night sky. Some stars shine much brighter than others. Some appear to be larger while others are tiny dots. From ancient times people have wanted to know what is out there. Today we send probes out beyond our solar system and create powerful telescopes to inform us about our universe. Ancient people also saw the starry sky as a road map for the present and future.

This is how the writer of the Gospel of Matthew introduces us to the idea that the God came into the world not just for the Jews, but for everyone. The starry sky became a road map for some open minded wise people from the East. A new configuration occurred, a rising star which they interpreted as a sign that a new king of the Jews was born. When they discovered this rising star, they didn’t just say, “Well, isn’t that nice,” and then went on with life as normal. No, they began a quest to find this new ruler. For the wise men this was not a spiritual journey to find the Son of God, the Savior of the world. There is no indication in the text that it was. They only knew him to be the King of the Jews, thus they stop and ask directions from the Roman Caesar’s appointed king, Herod. Here is where this whole political sub-plot that underlies the birth of Jesus begins. Herod was appointed by the Roman Caesar to be the King of the Jews. He was a nasty horrid king who did whatever it took to make himself look good to the Caesar. He created fear and suffering by persecuting the Jewish people. He took from them so they would be powerless. If he could not squelch this idea of a new king, Caesar would interpret it as a weakness and his own life would be threatened. He consults his Jewish scholars. They quote the prophet Micah who foretells that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem. So Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem. These wise men figure out that Herod is not out to honor this new king, but to get rid of him. So they return home ignoring Herod, but this doesn’t stop him from killing every male baby under the age of two to try to rid the nation of this baby King. It is important for us to know that Jesus was born into a real world of power, politics, and death threats. As the Living Son of God, Jesus lived in the darkness of our real world.

Back to the star...Astronomers since the birth of Jesus have been trying to authenticate what the star that the wise men saw. Some have said the star rose from a great reflection due to an alignment of planets while others have said that it rose because of a supernova, a birth of a new sun. None of these explanations really matter. What matters is that when these wise people saw the star rising, it became a sign, a revelation, a guidepost, a tracking device for them to something important. These wise people

were willing to commit whatever time it took and the resources it would require to reach this unknown destination. They did not begin this journey so they would become rising stars in their homeland. They did not follow the star to gain personal glory. There was no plan in place, except to follow the rising star wherever it led them. And they had no idea where it would lead them. In order to follow a rising star, one has to travel at night in the dark. A star can't be seen in the light of day. Each day as the sun set they resumed their quest. On cloud covered nights, they had to wait until there was a clear night sky to resume their journey.

Traveling in the dark can be a metaphor on life. One of the things I am learning as I mature in years is that one cannot really plan one's life. We can set goals and work toward those goals, but then life happens. The sun sets on our plans. Job prospects fail. Relationships end. Tragedies occur. We make wrong choices that change our plans. Illnesses steal our health. Loved ones die. We find ourselves groping in the dark wondering how we will find our way or if we will find our way out of the darkness. In this technological age, we can gain some wisdom from these ancient wise men. They didn't plan their trip. They relied on the Rising Star for guidance and committed to following it.

Each New Year we begin with the hope of a new tomorrow. For many 2013 was not a year that we had hoped it would be. Darkness settled onto our plans. We groped in the dark looking for even a pin prick of light, hoping against hope to find a light that would guide us out of our darkness. This is the first Sunday in the New Year. The star rises again, ready to guide, to bring us to the Christ Child again. It is also the first Sunday without our Minister of Spiritual Formation. It may seem like a dark time without her. She is a rising star that shone God's light onto many lives. For that we are grateful. She didn't shine to give glory to herself, but to give glory to God with her ministry. She would not want us to stop our spiritual journey, but to continue to follow the Rising Star that God places before us, leading us into an ever deeper relationship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

One of the ways we will continue to follow God's Rising Star is through continued Bible study and prayer. These means of God's grace will continue to shine light on our path. Like the wise men consulted their resources to read the star's sign, we have consulted a Mission Strategist to help us read the signs of our times, discover a revelation about our community and ourselves, and to find a guide post that will lead us into the future. The Mission Strategist has asked us to study God's word and pray every day for God's shining light to guide us. She has asked that we read one chapter a day from the Acts of the Apostles in January using the **SOAP** method. This is an acronym for **S**cripture, **O**bservation, **A**pplication, and **P**rayer. **S** stands for **S**cripture. Write down one scripture verse that stands out. **O** represents **O**bservation. Write down what you see in the verse and surrounding section. **A** is **A**pplication. Write how you sense God wants you to apply this verse to your life. And **P** is for **P**rayer. Write a short prayer of response asking God to help you do what God just showed you. Usually **SOAP** cleans, but this **SOAP** will shine light onto our path as we discern how we can grow in being rising stars in our community for the sake of the Good News. To paraphrase the words of Ruth Duck from her song, "Arise, your Light is Come," Salem, arise, your light is come! The Spirit's call obey; Show forth the glory of your God, Which shines on you today. Arise, your light is come! Fling wide the prison door; Proclaim the captives' liberty, Good tidings to the poor. Arise, your light is come! All you in sorrow born, Bind up the broken-hearted ones And comfort those who mourn. Arise, your light is come! The mountains burst in song! Rise up like eagles on the wing; God's power will make us strong. And Salem will continue to shine like the stars in this world's dark sky guiding others to God's marvelous Light.

**Resources:** *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors; "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, December 25, 2013; "Arise, Your Light Is Come!" by Ruth Duck, 1974, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990).

