

Follow a Star
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Salem United Methodist Church
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We have been on a journey to Bethlehem this year through the bedlam of Advent and the chaos that can accompany Christmas in our culture. I always have a hard time saying goodbye to my Christmas decorations. I have been known to keep them up for quite a long time after December 25. But, if your house is anything like my childhood home, your tree and tinsel, nativity themed salt and pepper shakers, and holiday dishes are already safely packed away for another year. I think that's why Christmas day can really feel more like the end of something than the beginning of something. It comes at the end of a slew of holidays, the end of Advent, the end of the calendar year... But endings have a funny way of butting up against beginnings. Christmas is also the start of something, a new life, Jesus' birth and entry into our world. One of my favorite Christmas songs reminds us of this beginning:

“In the first light of a new day
No one knew he had arrived
Things continued as they had been
While a newborn softly cried
But the heavens wrapped in wonder
Knew the meaning of his birth
In the weakness of a baby
They knew God had come to Earth”

What a terrifying thought: “things continued as they had been.” It actually reminds me of a celebrity interview I once saw when I was younger. I remember learning that this celebrity didn't really like Christmas. As a kid I could not believe this. Who doesn't like Christmas? And this celebrity didn't *dislike* Christmas, she just- eh, wasn't impressed. Actually, her complaint was that the whole Christmas experience was anticlimactic. There was all this anticipation and then, in the end, Christmas always turned out to be just another day with things going on in just the same way they always had.

Christmas is the celebration of God being with us- Jesus' birth and incarnation. Now Jesus is *present* in our world, yet sometimes it seems like our lives *do* just go on in the same way they always have without much difference or change. Why is that? At Christmas time we yearn for and long for and look forward to and anticipate Jesus coming to earth- like it's going to matter and mean something and change something and signify something in our lives. We feel this desire for an intimate relationship with Christ but then January begins and vacation is over and we are caught up in our busy schedules – before we know it we are back to business as usual. Instead of this experience, how do we make sure that our knowledge of Christ makes a difference in our lives? We can look to Matthew 2: 1-12 and the metaphorical model of the magi or wise men for a glimpse of wisdom.

We have a tendency to compress the Christmas story by pulling the wise men into our Christmas pageants and manger scenes. But, this second chapter of Mathew is the only biblical account of the magi and a close read conflicts with what I grew up thinking about these three kings. So let's set the record straight. We are not given a specific number of people. Our tradition tells us that the number three was derived from the number of gifts- gold, frankincense and myrrh- offered in the story but in Eastern Christianity they talk about 12 wise men. At some time after Jesus birth, they visit Mary and the Christ child in a house, not an Inn or a manger with crowds of shepherds, but at some later date- 12 days, others say four months later, some say 2 years later . They were not kings and it was a later developed legend which named them Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. These characters are called magi in the original Greek and they were probably priests and astrologers with some influence or interest in the powerful leaders of their world. Certainly they were regarded as men of great learning. Their business was reading and interpreting the sky and they would have been held in high esteem in society for their scientific abilities. One thing that our text and Christmas tradition do agree on is that the magi found the newborn king by following a star.

I wonder about this unusual sight. What does it look like to see a rising star? How exactly do you follow it? Many have written scientific essays trying to explain the physical science behind the meaning of the

text's claim that the star "stopped" over Jesus' location. The truth is that no one really knows which theory is correct: a comet, a nova- or white dwarf dying star- or something supernatural. My favorite explanation involves the conjunction or cluster and interplay between two planets, Jupiter and Saturn. The two planets interweave in and out with each other's paths in retrograde motion. This phenomenon happens every 800 years so in 7BC its possible that those studying the sky noticed what was happening. Historians explain that the wise men's interpretation likely involved the belief that each planet had a meaning. As the largest planet, Jupiter represented the "king of the heavens" and Saturn was regarded as the "star protector of Israel." Astrologers observing this interplay asked, "What does this mean? Royalty...the protector of Israel...What do these two intertwining stars mean to us?" We can see how they could have extrapolated the need to travel to Jerusalem- the power-center and capital city of Judea – to speak to King Herod- the Roman appointed ruler over Israel to investigate the birth of a king.

Nick Strobel the planetarium director and a physical science professor at Bakersfield College in central California is an astronomer and lifelong United Methodist. He says, "It's fun to speculate, but the nature of the star does not really matter to my faith. In fact, I would not care if Matthew made up the whole story of the magi. [Matthew] was not writing a science textbook or newspaper account, but rather a book to persuade people that this person called Jesus was the Son of God, one who should be worshipped, and one who showed us how to live as God wants us to live." For Nick Strobel and for us, this story "contains a deeper truth than can be found in any star chart." As Strobel points out, the real story here is about "God, the infinite power of the universe, who is willing and wanting to have a relationship with us." That is what makes this a star of wonder, might, and beauty bright. That is what makes this story amazing.

If this is true, how exactly do we read this story in the context of our relationship with God? I think it's interesting that the wise men are the first speaking humans in Mathew's gospel. As a former English major I know that this is a red flag, you see first words are almost always significant. And what is their first statement? It's a question: "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." This story is about seeking the child, the King, Jesus Christ. It's about following and finding God. I believe that God is always calling us into relationship with signs. Some signs are bright and dramatic like the star, others are quiet and persistent. We must be alert and observant like the wise men because God is ever present and communicating with us. Listen. Look. Pay attention.

So our first lesson from the wise men is to be alert. The second thing they model for us is a willingness to respond with action. The wise men could have observed, charted, and recorded the appearance of this star, appreciated its wonder, told people their amazing story, and done nothing more. They could have gone back to work, back to business as usual. But they didn't. They made a commitment that caused them to take action and live differently. This sign put them on a journey, a quest, a mission. They were bold. They made a commitment to search for this new king by traveling from the East (which could refer to Rome's rival, ancient Parthia or modern day Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Yemen) to Jerusalem. When God breaks into our daily lives, are we willing to respond in the same way? To begin a journey of faith?

Because they were paying attention, these wise men were able to respond to God's invitation by committing to action. They committed to the act of following a star and trusting that something special waited for them at the end of the journey. So how did they wind-up in Jerusalem? I think they stopped looking at the star in the sky and decided to follow their own logic. They asked themselves, "Where are we going to find a King of the Jews? Obviously, in Jerusalem."

It reminds me of driving with my Dad. I have a terrible sense of direction which is why I love my GPS. I use it all the time so I got myself a nice dash mount so that little suction cup would not be continuously falling off my windshield. When I rode to Rehoboth Beach with my Dad a couple years ago, I brought my GPS. My Dad has had an interesting reaction to GPS devices...He is past the stage of refusing to use it. When it was new, he would say, "Turn that off, we don't need that!" He's past that now. Now he makes a game out of it: Beat the GPS. "What? Why would I go that way? I know a shortcut, believe me, I know a better way. I can get us there in half that time." My GPS does a lot of recalculating when my Dad drives- but he did get us to the beach in great time. So is that what happened to the wise men? Did they recalculate their star-led journey? Is that how they ended up in Jerusalem?

The wise men get back on track in a telling way. They consult scripture. Herod calls for the scribes and priests and learns that Bethlehem is the prophesied location of the new king. When the wise men get back on

course, now following the star (maybe a little more closely than before) they find their destination and with it “overwhelming joy.” The wise men teach us to keep our eyes on the prize, follow the star, follow God’s direction not our own, and to look to scripture as a guide when we are lost.

Being alert, committing to following, and leaning on scripture lead the wise men to a dramatic encounter with God which involves joy, the sharing of gifts, and worship. The theological essence of Epiphany is the revelation and clarity of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Here is an encounter the wise men could see and hear and touch and understand. The same is true for us. If we want to know God, we must turn our eyes to Jesus. His teaching, his actions, and his sacrifice reveal God to us. Yet, notice, the wise men do not stay basking in the light of the star and the Christ child. Once we are pulled into relationship with God we are sent back out. The wise men receive a new mission. They must avoid Herod and return home. In relationship with God we continue to look for direction and ways to follow.

The wise men return to their region. I wonder, what happened next? Were they changed? Could their lives go back to business as usual after such an encounter? It’s certainly possible, isn’t it? No matter how dramatic that encounter was, or how meaningful that worship experience was, or how gloriously we celebrate Christmas day, the journey continues. We begin again with the first light of new day. The question is, will we continue as we had been or as new creations ready for new journeys? I think it is a triumph that the wise men continued responding to God and I hope the rest of their lives were filled with same devoted discipleship and growth.

As we begin 2016 I invite you to break out of business as usual and to begin a new journey in your discipleship which will draw you ever nearer to God. God calls us closer by offering us guiding stars. Be ready to meet God in the midst of your everyday activities. Find a star. Follow the light and commit to following Christ with scripture as your guide. Friends, let us learn from the wise men and be open to the transforming power of following a star.

During communion – after you have received the bread and cup- you will have the opportunity to begin a journey for 2016 like the Magi by following a star that will lead you closer to Christ. You will be able to draw your own star from the basket in the front. The youth group helped me with this project. Each star is labeled with one of the fruit of the Spirit which our Galatians text reminded us of- excellent guides for Christ-like life. We will be blindly drawing these stars...Do you know why the ancient world was so fond of casting lots? It is the sort of action which allows and trusts divine intervention. We are going to trust in the Holy Spirit as we draw stars today. I pray that you will each receive in a way that is meaningful to your spiritual journey for this New Year. The star is a gift for you to take home- maybe hang it somewhere you will see it regularly. During communion you can begin to reflect on your star. Over the year you can spend time in study and in prayer over the star you have pulled and how it can impact your life as you strive to move closer in your relationship with Christ.