

Your Light Has Come 01/05/2014
 First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, FL

Isaiah 60:1-6

- Arise, shine; for your light has come,
 and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
- 2 For darkness shall cover the earth,
 and thick darkness the peoples;
 but the LORD will arise upon you,
 and his glory will appear over you.
- 3 Nations shall come to your light,
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- 4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
 they all gather together, they come to you;
 your sons shall come from far away,
 and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
- 5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
 your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
 because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
 the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
- 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,
 the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
 all those from Sheba shall come.
 They shall bring gold and frankincense,
 and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-13

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "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." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

- 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
 are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
 for from you shall come a ruler
 who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

BRING IN THE KINGS?

Tomorrow the church celebrates Epiphany. An epiphany of course is an unexpected revelation.

So, Epiphany with a capital E is the day when we celebrate God’s unexpected revelation. God was in Christ. I like to also think of it as the official end to the Christmas season.

This day has an unofficial name in our area. Many of you grew up celebrating Epiphany as Three Kings Day. Think of it this way. Christmas isn’t over until we bring in the Kings!

So, today (a day early because no one will come to church on Monday) we bring in the kings. The bells played “We Three Kings,” and we’ll sing it as well. Today is one last chance to celebrate before we go back to work.

I really like the idea of a holiday season, an extended time to rejoice and give thanks with family. But, I want us as Christians to reimagine that season. Christmas is not just one day but a season dedicated to reflection. It is as a time to reflect anew upon the grace of God and the wonder of the incarnation.

God was in Christ. God is with us and for us. That Good News is too good for just one day. We need a season to reflect upon what that means. And we need to hear the story from different perspectives.

Celebrating Christmastide and Epiphany allows us to do this.

The Christmas story in Matthew is quite different from the Christmas story in Luke or John. And today we hear the story from Matthew’s angle.

As we said last week Matthew's gospel is about God's salvation for the whole world. Matthew wants us to tell the whole world the Good News. If I had to select a Christmas hymn to represent the gospel of Matthew it would be, "Go tell it on the mountain over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born."

The story of the three "kings" makes an appropriate beginning to that gospel. These exotic strangers from the far reaches of the ancient world come in search of the King. They represent the fact that the birth of this child is God's gift to the whole world. No one lives too far away to hear the Good News.

NOT KINGS BUT MAGI

But, first just a word of clarification.

We may have embellished the story a bit over the years in ways that prevent us from hearing the story of the Magi clearly.

We sing, "We three kings of Orient are," but maybe not.

We don't necessarily know that there were three of these people from the East. Three gifts were mentioned, but the Bible doesn't say there were just three people.

And more importantly these people from the East most certainly were not "Kings."

They were Magi. In Persia this word originally referred to dream interpreters. By Jesus' time the term referred to astrologers or fortunetellers. In fact the words magic and magician come from the word magi.

These guys were not wise men, at least from the Jewish perspective. They represented the epitome of Gentile idolatry. They were dabblers in chicken gizzards and charts "predicting" the future. They were definitely not kosher.

The word, magi also occurs in Acts 13. Barnabas and Paul come to island of Paphos. There they meet Elymas, a Jewish "magnus" or magician. Paul describes him this way; "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"

This gives us some insight into how the first readers of Matthew's gospel may have viewed the Magi.

They weren't kings. They weren't wise men. They were charlatans. They were pagans. They were the wrong race, the wrong denomination and the wrong religion. One commentator suggested that even the gifts they gave Jesus, the gold, frankincense and myrrh were elements used in their practice of magic.

The Son of God comes into the world and whom does God choose to witness the event? He chooses the guys from the psychic hotline!

WISE MEN AND KINGS BY GOD'S GRACE

But, in this case the Magi are indeed wise men.

They are wise because, by the grace of God, they understand what everyone else does not understand. Something significant has happened. They have seen the Messiah's star rising in the East.

In our lesson from Isaiah we read this prophecy, "Arise shine for your light has come ... Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn ... They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

So perhaps these magi are more than just second-rate magicians on a fool's errand. Maybe they represent the coming kingdom. Maybe they are the ones spoken of by the prophet.

Maybe these magi are also the "kings" who come to praise God. Their royal status is confirmed not by their birth but by what God allows them to witness.

The magi followed the star. They were willing to begin with the light God had given them and they look beyond it to a greater light.

They were willing to leave their home and their old way of thinking to witness the dawn of a new kingdom. The Magi were filled with joy at the prospect.

FILLED WITH FEAR

On the other hand, Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled at the idea of a new king. They were not filled with joy. They were filled with fear. What made the difference?

I think the Magi saw in the star a mystery beyond all mysteries. They saw in the star something that was above and beyond the possibilities of their own small lives. They saw the hand of God writ large in the night sky.

And maybe that's the lesson for us. Follow the star. Go where God leads you. Look up and see the hand of God writ large in the night sky.

In order to do that, you have to truly believe that God's ways are not our ways. In order to follow the star you have to truly believe that you don't have all the answers and that life is a journey. Only God knows our final destination.

But, Herod and the religious leaders of Jerusalem were profoundly disturbed at that message because they were not interested in making a journey.

Faith for them was not about movement. Faith for them was about stability. The message that the Magi brought didn't fit with their buttoned down, nailed down concept of religion.

Like so many in our world today, Herod and the religious leaders of Jerusalem thought that religion's job was to baptize the status quo. The religious folk were called upon to give God's blessing to the present government, no matter how corrupt it may be.

But, when these exotic strangers show up at the palace seeking the one who is born king of the Jews, the powers that be and all of Jerusalem are profoundly disturbed. They are frightened by such a message.

Imagine strangers from the East bringing us a message like this today. Do you think we would welcome them with open arms?

I don't think so. We don't like any sign that threatens the world, as we know it. We don't trust people who are strangers and stargazers. We call them impractical, unrealistic and even crazy.

They frighten us.

THE JOURNEY OF FAITH

But, maybe God wants us to listen to those stargazers. And maybe God even wants us to become stargazers.

Maybe God wants us to go in a different direction in response to a greater purpose. Maybe God wants us to look up instead of about. Maybe God wants

us to care more about eternity than about the mundane drudgery of our own desires.

I wonder. Is this what it means for us to follow the star?

If this is true, then faith is not a destination but a long and difficult journey. We too will travel far seeking the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords. And sometimes we will frighten those who like their religion to be more predictable.

But, I think the journey is worth it.
Today I would encourage you to follow the star.

Leave room in your life for wonder and mystery. Leave room in your life for the still small voice that points you toward the light in the sky and the hope that is not of this world.

SEEKING THE PRESENCE OF JESUS

The Magi sought to be in the presence of the Messiah, the one who was born king. I think that should be our goal as well.

Following Jesus is more than just saying things about Jesus.

Following Jesus is doing things that will lead us into His presence. Following Jesus is about risking conflict with the Herods of the world who have a different view of things. Following Jesus is about giving up everything in order to find him and worship him.

The Magi show us the way to Jesus.

They were strangers to the promises of God. But, in their hearts they wanted to know God. They were seekers. They believed that the presence of God was more important than gold or precious goods and so they sought God's presence with all their heart, soul and mind.

And they found God in the most humble of circumstances.

THE OTHER WISE MAN

There have been many works of fiction created from the story of the magi. One of my favorites is Henry Van Dyke's "The Other Wise Man." In Van Dyke's

story a fourth wise man named Artaban started for Bethlehem with a gift of jewels ... a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl of great price.

But, as Artaban rode to meet the other three wise men he saw a man lying half dead by the roadside. He reigned in his horse and dismounted.

Artaban was a skilled physician, but it took time to revive the man, so he arrived too late to join the others. As a result he was forced to sell the sapphire to buy a camel and supplies for a trip across the desert.

When he reached Bethlehem, a woman with a baby told him that the other wise men had been there, but the child and his parents had suddenly left for Egypt. While he was in her home, Herod's soldiers came seeking infant boys that they had been ordered to kill. Artaban used his ruby to buy the life of the woman's son.

From Bethlehem he went to Egypt, always searching for the King and always finding someone who needed his help.

Finally, thirty-three years later, we see him in Jerusalem, old and gray, but still carrying his one remaining gift, the precious pearl. He hears that the man who is called "King of the Jews" is to be crucified, and he realizes that this is the King he has sought so long.

Believing that the pearl may ransom the King, he hurries to Golgotha. But, on the way he passes a terrified young girl being taken into slavery. In an agony of decision, he gives the pearl for her freedom.

Suddenly there is a great earthquake. Artaban is hurled to the ground mortally wounded. But, as he lies there a soft voice is heard, seemingly out of nowhere ...

The old man replies, "No Lord. When did I do any of these things? When did I feed you, or save you? For thirty-three years I have sought you but have never found you, my King."

And the soft voice speaks again, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Artaban's eyes close. A smile crosses his lips. His journey has ended. The fourth wise man was able to bring his gifts to the King.

When asked about where he got the idea for this story Van Dyke said,

"I do not know where this little story came from--out of the air, perhaps. One thing is certain, it is not written in any other book, nor is it to be found among the ancient lore of the East. And yet I have never felt as if it were my own. It was a gift, and it seemed to me as if I knew the Giver."

I understand. This is just a story made up out of thin air. But, in a sense it's a true story. It's true in the sense that it tells the meaning of all our journeys. It's true because it is profoundly based upon a greater story, the story of Scripture.

THE STAR OF COMPASSION

I believe that each moment is always more than it seems. There is a guiding light in life that can show us that true meaning. Where is the star that we are to follow? What will lead us to the King?

Matthew's gospel begins with Magi seeking the King. But, toward the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus talks about the last judgment. How will people be judged? They will be judged by their acts of compassion.

And in their acts of compassion they will find themselves in the presence of the King.

In this passage the King tells the righteous,

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

The righteous answer, "When did we do that?"

And the King answers, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me."

When people read the story of the Magi, they often speculate about the star. What was it? Was it Haley's comet? Was it an unusual alignment of the planets? What great light led the Magi to Jesus?

I really can't say. The first star that led the Magi is a great mystery.

But, I can tell you the star that leads us to Jesus today. It is the star of compassion. This is the light that shines in our darkness.

You don't need to bring fancy gifts of gold or frankincense. You just need to bring what you have and use it in the service of the King.

And when we come to the end of our journey we will discover that the Lord has been with us all along.

God give us the courage and the faith to follow this star in the year ahead.

Amen.