

**“Follow the Star”**

January 6, 2019

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

**Matthew 2:1-12**

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.

“THAT SPEAKS TO ME”

On the news this past week I heard that some evangelical pastors are in dialogue with Muslim leaders in the Middle East. The pastor who was leading the group said,

"As a devout evangelical Christian, I believe what the New Testament says. Jesus is my savior,

but every time an imam or a leader of a Muslim nation — when they begin a speech, and they say,

'In the name of God, the compassionate, and the merciful,'

.....that speaks to me! “

That’s amazing to hear an evangelical pastor say such a thing.

I wonder.

Can people who live far from us, who have a very different culture, and a much different understanding of God speak to us on matters of faith?

Could these outsiders, these alien people, actually have an insight that could bring us closer to Christ?

## MAGI

Today's text seems to suggest that this is possible.

Today we think about the wise men,  
the "kings" who come from afar to pay homage to the new born king.

Most of us have a positive view of the wise men.  
After all, they're part of our story  
about the birth of Christ.

We have works of fiction that portray their exploits,  
and speculate about what they were like.

Where we live, for many people at least,  
Christmas doesn't end until we bring in the kings and celebrate Three  
Kings Day.

(By the way I'm all for that. Let's keep the holiday season going for as long  
as possible!)

But, in Jesus' day these kings or wise men might not have been so  
revered.

The word used to describe them in the Greek New Testament is the word  
Magi.

That word does not mean wise men or kings.

This word originally referred to dream interpreters,  
and by Jesus' time the term referred to astrologers or fortunetellers.

These guys were not wise men,  
at least from the Jewish perspective.  
They represented the epitome of Gentile idolatry.

Dabblers in chicken gizzards  
and charts "predicting" the future.

That kind of stuff.  
Not kosher.

In the book of Acts.  
Barnabas and Paul come  
upon a magi named Elymas.

The people are eager to hear what the apostles have to say, but this magi,  
this magician opposes them.

And Paul responds by calling the guy  
“a child of the devil”  
an “enemy of everything that is right”.

According to the apostle, this devious magician was trying to “make  
crooked the straight paths 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.

One commentator suggested that even the gifts they gave Jesus,  
the gold, frankincense and myrrh were elements used in their practice of  
magic.

And yet...

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

Why in the world would anyone listen to these guys?

## A FEARFUL MESSAGE

Well, as it turns out, King Herod and all of Jerusalem  
take the message of the Magi very seriously.

Since the Magi thought that the star indicated the birth of a new king, they quite naturally thought that they could find the new king in Herod's palace.

Can you imagine the surprise in the royal court?  
These strange looking guys from a far away land show up and ask,

“Hey, where's the new king?  
Where's this baby that is born king of the Jews?  
We've seen his star and have come to worship him.”

I sometimes wonder why Herod and his court just didn't laugh it off.

“You guys call yourselves wise men?  
There's been no babies born in this place.

Go back home where you belong.  
We don't need more false prophets here.  
We already have enough than you very much!”

But, that's not what happened.  
The Bible tells us that Herod was frightened.

And all of Jerusalem was frightened as well.

You see, Herod was insecure.  
He was king.  
But he was always afraid that someone would come to take his place.

And because Herod was so afraid,  
he was a threat to his family  
(many of whom he had killed by the way),  
he was a threat to his friends and advisors,  
and he was a threat to all Jerusalem.

So, when Herod was afraid, everyone was afraid.

It's still true.

A fearful leader creates fear in the society he leads.

Everyone is on edge when the leader is afraid  
because no one knows what that leader is going to do next.

And this kind of fear at the top  
almost always leads to tragedy.  
Such was the case with Herod.

WHERE IS THE MESSIAH?

Not out of faith but out of fear he calls together the chief priests and  
scribes.

And Herod asks,

“So, this Messiah predicted by Scripture  
...where exactly is he to be born?”

That’s an easy question for these religious leaders.

“The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.”

And then they quote Scripture to back up their claim

Having obtained this information from his religious leaders,  
the King now summons the Magi again for a private audience and he asks  
them,

“Tell me. Exactly when did this star first appear?”

Of course we know the rest of this story.

This fearful king will eventually use this information to try and eliminate any  
pretenders to the throne with a horrific act of violence.

But, for now he’s willing to let the Magi lead him to the child.

The King says, “You guys find the child.

And when you do, send word to the palace.

I too want to go and worship this newborn king.”

Really?

A deranged old king is going to worship the one  
who is potentially a threat to his throne?

I don't know if the Magi were really wise men or not, but it seems to me that it wouldn't take too much brainpower to realize that the king was not on the level.

But, the Magi set out to find the child.  
EXCEEDING GREAT JOY

Once again the star appears, and comes to rest at the place where the child lives.

And the Bible tells us when they saw the star stop, they were overwhelmed with joy.

"They rejoiced with exceeding great joy" as the KJV puts it.

(I like the song that the folks who do the Candlelight Processional at Disney sing. "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with great joy." That song conveys the joy they must have felt.)

So, filled with joy the Magi enter the home and see Mary and the child.  
They kneel down and give the child the homage that is due a king

And then they open their treasure chest and give him gifts fit for a king, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But, that night the wise men are warned in a dream. It might not be such a good idea to go back to crazy King Herod's palace.

So they wise up and take the back roads on the way back to their country.

GOOD NEWS FOR OUTSIDERS

In all the gospels, from his birth to his death, the story is the same.

The people who know the truth about Jesus are often not the people who have political power or religious pedigree.

Those who point the way to Jesus are outsiders

or people who reside on the bottom rung of society's ladder.

Today's lesson follows that pattern. The people who have seen the star and know the identity of Jesus are Magi. They are magicians, soothsayers, aliens from a distant country.

But, these strangers knew the truth.  
When everyone else was afraid,  
they rejoiced with great joy.

What can we learn from these strangers  
from a land far away?

### FOLLOW THE STAR

We learn that the mystery of the salvation comes from upon high.

When the Magi saw the star, they saw something that was above and beyond 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.

### FEAR OF CHANGE

But, Herod and the religious leaders of Jerusalem were profoundly disturbed at that message. 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 because it suggests that their  
dreams are too small.

They are frightened by such a message because it suggests that there are  
forces in this world more powerful than their political ambitions.

The Magi claim that God is bringing a new king to Israel, a Messiah, a sav-  
ior.

They have seen his star.  
And everyone is scared out of their wits.

Imagine strangers from the East bringing us a message like this today.

Do you think that we'd like the idea that folks from a foreign country are  
telling us that we're getting a new leader?

Do you think we would welcome them with open arms?

We might even appoint a special counsel to look into foreign interference in  
our election!

We don't like any sign that threatens the world, as we know it.

We don't trust people who are strangers and follow the star.

They frighten us.

But, maybe God wants us to listen to them.

Maybe God even wants us to join them in their journey.

Maybe God even wants us to listen to people from a land far away who practice a different religion.

Who knows?

Maybe they will speak to us about God in a way that will lead us to an important discovery?

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 and political tribalism.

I wonder.

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

## SEEKING JESUS

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.

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.

Following Jesus is about giving up everything in order to find him and wor-  
ship him.

The Magi still 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.

## WISDOM FROM ABOVE

In the end, the Magi do prove to be wise men.  
They are not wise because of who they are and what they have learned.

They are wise because of what God chose  
to reveal to them.  
They have a wisdom that comes from above.

By the grace of God, these soothsayers really do see the future.

Something significant has happened in their world.

A Messiah is born.

And they bear witness to that birth.

They have seen the Messiah's star rising in the East.  
And they follow the star.

These Magi fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"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."

These magi are God's chosen ones.  
They are more than just second-rate magicians on a fool's errand.

They are harbingers of the kingdom that comes.

They are kings whose 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 that light eventually led them to God's Son,  
the King of kings.

DO WE FOLLOW THE STAR?

Many of us are star gazers.  
But, are we willing to actually follow the star?

Are willing to take this long journey?  
Are willing to abandon our old way of life  
in order to welcome a new way of life?

In order to find the Savior, we must be willing to follow the star.

We must be willing to go on the journey.  
We must be willing to bring the gifts that we have to the Lord.

Today we ordain  
and install new leaders in our church.  
They will be called to answer in the affirmative questions prescribed by our  
denomination.

And one of those questions is:  
“Will you...seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence *imagination*,  
and love?”

I want to point to one word in that question, “imagination”.

What does it mean to serve the people with imagination?

I think it means to follow the star.  
I think it means to be open  
to the leading of God’s Word and Spirit.

This is the beginning of a new year for all of us.  
One of the reasons we celebrate a new year is that it gives a chance to  
change.

What can we do to make things different this year?

Maybe we need to travel with wise women and wise men who are seeking  
Jesus.

And by the grace of God we will find Him,  
...most likely in some new and surprising places.

Amen.