

# Led By A Star

Sermon by  
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We're still in the Christmas season, but it may be hard to tell. The 25<sup>th</sup> of December has come and gone, and so has the first of the year. Tomorrow beckons with the return to school, return to work, return to winter blahs.

Yes, the Christian calendar may say that this is the 11<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, but we have long since moved on. We have to do that, you know, because that is how our worlds work. We have to get back to doing what we were doing before the shepherds and the angels told us about something new and different that God was up to. Our attitude seems to be, That's great, God, thanks a lot. Now if you will excuse us we have to get back to our lives. We have to move on, to business as usual, back to our world with a lousy economy, back to our world with rocket attacks and children dying in Gaza, back to our worlds in which we no longer have a job, back to our worlds in which we feel like we are just spinning our wheels.

There is something missing in all of this, something which I hope you noticed. What's missing is the joy. This is a time of year to be joyful, to be filled with the glorious, incredible, unrestrained joy that God has entered our worlds and has not left us alone to be 'spinning our wheels.' At least, that is how this whole time of year is supposed to be, for us anyway. For we are the insiders, the people of faith, the church of Jesus Christ, and we know all of this. We know it in a cognitive way. But sometimes other things – like life – get in the way.

We are still in the Christmas season, but the day after tomorrow is Epiphany, the day the Wise Men came to see the baby – or, judging the way the story plays out, maybe we should understand him as toddler – Jesus. So it is not too early to celebrate this wonderful and festive day, and hear again this story that is woefully familiar to us. I say 'woefully' because sometimes the familiarity of it gets in the way for us. When you are a little too familiar with something, you can miss the joy.

For instance, there is the character of the Wise Men themselves. Legend has given them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Those three have names because the number of the wise men is part of the legend, too. Why do we think there are three? Because that was the standard room capacity for Bethlehem? Matthew doesn't give us a number. Maybe there were three. Maybe there were two. Maybe there were twenty. All we know is they were men who studied the stars, and they came from the East, probably Persia, modern day Iran. That makes them outsiders. They are Gentiles, and they are Gentiles who practice an art that was forbidden in Israel, that of studying the stars, looking for signs in the heavens that might give us good or bad luck. That puts them in the lot of the superstitious, which makes them double outsiders. When this story is too familiar, we miss that.

We might also miss their royal audience. They are greeted by Herod the Great, who ruled this part of the world, sort of, when Jesus was born. I say he 'sort of' ruled because the Romans were the real ones in charge. And yet Herod had a special role to play, a governing role which he played - if articles from National Geographic are any indication - very well. Herod was known as a prolific builder. But Matthew doesn't tell us about any of his building projects. Matthew tells us about his fear.

Herod is king, after all, and the last thing a king needs is someone blithely wandering into their kingdom asking where the new king is. The Gospel tells us that Herod was greatly upset with the Wise Men's words, as were those in Jerusalem. Maybe we are too familiar with this text to wonder why. That is because Herod and those in Jerusalem were the insiders, and the powerful insiders at that. They were faithful, devoted Hebrews, and they were the ones in control and they didn't want anyone messing with that control. When you are in control, when you have the power, when everything has always been done the way you want and the way those who think like you want, you don't want anyone messing with anything.

Herod gets the information he wants then sends out the Wise Men to look for the child. But it is what they feel when they leave Herod and look up at the night sky that may just pass us by, all of us who think we know this story. I like the way the Good News Bible puts this – "When they saw it (the star), how happy they were, what joy was theirs!"

Of all the pictures I have ever seen of the Wise Men, I don't think I have ever seen one in which they had a joyful look on their face. Pious, yes. Holy, yes. Adoring, yes. But joyful? Excited? Exuberant joy, like they just got the secret of life revealed to them? Like they had just gotten off the ski slopes after they had finally conquered the most difficult hill in the place? Like they had just been told they made it into MIT? Like they had just gotten the promotion they thought was going to someone else? Like they had just received the most wonderful news any parent can receive?

Think of the most joyful experience you have ever had. Now plant that feeling onto these Wise Men. That's the picture I think Matthew wants us to have of these guys. They had traveled so far, having seen this star and knowing what it meant. They had just met with this monarch who received them rather coldly and probably left them feeling a little uneasy. But now the same star they had seen in their country is up there right in front of them, beckoning them on. What joy was theirs!

We are at the start of a new year, the beginning of all kinds of possibilities and potentials. This old, familiar story has the capacity to either lull us to sleep with that familiarity, or excite us with its joy. Personally, I want to embrace the joy. I want that because that is the Wise Men's gift not only to the Christ child, but to us who follow Jesus as well. Because following Jesus is supposed to be joyful. It is supposed to be that activity which gives us a joy beyond all joys, a joy that transforms all joys, a joy that illuminates all joys.

When I think about the start of a new year, I find that the story of the Wise Men is as personal as my birth date, yet as universal as the night sky we all gaze at. I look at this story and I look at the year ahead of me and ahead of us and see all kinds of parallels. I'm hoping – and maybe you are, too, considering how much I have talked about this – that this will be the year that I wrap up my work on my doctorate. What set me on this pilgrimage was a concern that the church and the culture in which the church is located had change, and that change was not all bad. It could be that God is up to something, the same God who put that star up in the sky to lead the Wise Men to Jesus.

As I look at this story and as I look at the church I see so many connections. We are all like the Wise Men, seeking Jesus, seeking to come and bow our knees and worship him. We know we don't have this whole faith thing right, but we come, anyway, trusting that the One to whom we bend our knees in worship will correct us and show us the way. We could have stayed home, but like the Wise Men we thought this journey was more important than playing it safe and staying put.

But just as we are the Wise Men, so also are we Herods in our own ways. We all want the way things have always been. We don't want God messing up our own individual and self-centered sense of control. Besides, we have enough things to worry about. Please, God, no more stress, no more change.

And yet there are the Wise Men going out and seeing the star, seeing the signs of God breaking into the world, and they are overjoyed. There is the sense in all of that that God is the One who holds the future, who holds the stars, and with that in mind we can continue in our pilgrimage. Not only can we continue, but we can, like the Wise Men, be joyful – incredibly joyful. Because we still see God leading us into the future, we can approach it with joy. Other people might want to use stock predictions, horoscopes or fantasy sports to get them through. We will follow the Star that proclaims the birth of the One who invites us to go home another way.

But while we get too go home another way, we always remember where home is for us. It is this table. It is the table of our Lord. It is the table where we eat and drink, but we also remember. We remember, with joy, those who have shared with us what this meal is all about. We remember our call to share that joy with others, so that they, too, may come here with joy. We remember that Christ calls us here, feeds us here, and then sends us out from here. We are led by a star – an instrument by which God may call all kinds of people, who seek one thing in common: An incredible joy that leads us to Jesus. Amen.

The bible text is Matthew 2:1-12

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