

Wesley United Methodist Church
January 1, 2017
New Year's Day
Epiphany Celebration
Who are You? Follow Your Star.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany – the Manifestation of the Lord – a Christian celebration that is even more ancient than our celebration of Christmas. This is a day when we often focus on the Wise Men, or Magi and their journey following a star to find the child in Bethlehem.

The story of the Magi has been expanded through the years so that we think we know more about these men than we really do. Please stay with me and try not to get angry right away. Legend sometimes calls them Kings – as in the Song we sang, “We Three Kings” – but they were probably not kings. Calling them kings may have come from the value of the gifts that they bring and the places where the psalms and prophets say that even kings will bow down in worship before the Messiah. The Isaiah passage we read this morning foreshadowed this event telling of kings worshipping and camels coming from faraway places bringing gold and frankincense. We don't even know that there were three of them – that is based on the three gifts that they brought. Matthew doesn't tell us how many there were. In Eastern Christianity, especially in the Syriac Church, the wise men are often seen as twelve; maybe because the same Isaiah passage we read says “a multitude of camels”.

I suspect that some of the enhancements involve literary license and ways to expand the symbolism, excitement, and importance of their visit. It is not uncommon for stories meant to illustrate something important to become legends that are held as factual.

But, regardless of how many wise men there were, their presence in Matthew's gospel is truly significant and worth us giving them more attention.

What I think is truly significant about these wise men who came is that through them Matthew very quickly makes it known that Jesus is more than just a little Jewish baby born in Bethlehem. The men who came were not Jews. They were foreigners from somewhere in the East. Jesus was to be more than a messiah for the Jews.

The term used here to describe these men is used only a few other times in Scripture and it generally refers to people who paid close attention to the stars and the signs of the heavens, looking to them for meaning and their influence on life – astrology - a practice that was specifically discouraged for Jews. Remember that the Bible begins with the assertion that God created the heaven and earth – the stars – and so from a Jewish perspective, the stars were nothing more than the lights in heaven placed there by God. They had no power, could not predict the future, and were not signs or omens of things to come.

And yet, Matthew's Gospel has the arrival of these men who came **because they observed a star** as the very first thing he tells about after Jesus' birth. Might this be a sign to us, that through Jesus, God will reach out to all people no matter where they are, no matter what set of beliefs they have, no matter how they are considered in society. Removed by about 2,000 years from these events, and influenced by our traditions and literature, it can be hard for us to understand how radical this visit would have been. We believe that Jesus came for all people, but that was a radical idea when Matthew's gospel was written. He is making a profound statement about who Jesus is by including this.

What also cannot be ignored is that this visit sets the stage for Jesus to be a person of great concern to those who hold political power. Herod and his court are frightened and threatened by the possibility that a child has been born who will become the “King of the Jews”. This would be a great threat to the Roman empire.

Indeed, when the wise men fail to return to Herod, he responds out of his fear by ordering the death of all boys in Bethlehem age two and under. Matthew tells us that not only were the wise men warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but that Joseph was also warned in a dream to take Jesus and Mary and flee with them to Egypt so that Jesus would not be killed.

So, there is great significance to this story, and a lot that we can take from it. Today, however, I want to focus on the idea of following the star. For the next several weeks, we will be looking at ways that we answer the question, “Who are You?” We will discover that “who we are” is indelibly linked to “Whose we are.” What amazing things could happen if each of us lived into our best, most passionate, loving self?ⁱ

The wise men came to Jesus because of a star. They committed a great deal of time, energy, and resources to a long trip to find the child that they identified with a star and they came first to worship him and then also to bring gifts to him. Again, I believe that this is Matthew’s way of letting us know that God reaches out to everyone and meets us where we are. We make our initial steps toward God in many different ways. For the wise men who came to Jesus it was through the appearance of a star.

For some of us, our first steps toward Jesus may have come through our parents, Sunday School, teachers, pastors, or others. For others, that first step toward Jesus may have come through a 12-step program and wanting to know more about the “higher power.” For others, that first step

may have come through a friend or a life event. Our paths toward Jesus are varied.

However, in some way, God managed to get our attention and we come to worship God as the wise men did. We also bring gifts as they did – in our case, we may think of our financial gifts when we receive the morning offering. However, we bring many other gifts. We bring gifts of time, abilities, energy, commitment. We bring gifts of hospitality, listening, caring, prayer, service, and any number of ways that we serve God and worship God through our daily actions and interactions with family, friends, co-workers, students, teachers, people we meet wherever we go.

“Who are you?” “Who are we?” We are the children of God, and who we are is made up of everything we do, everything we think and say, every part of our lives.

The wise men found what they were looking for by following a star. For us the “star” may be a symbol of whatever way we seek God’s direction in our lives. God has hung out a star for each of us – one designed to meet our needs, even if we do not know what those needs are. “When we trust the “star” that God hung out for us, we move toward life in its fullest and discover joy beyond imagining. What paths is God shining light upon for you?”ⁱⁱ

What star are you being called to follow at this point in your life? Is there a dream that God has planted in your heart but that you are afraid to believe? Might God be calling you to take a first step toward something that you can only begin to imagine? Trust that God wants life in its fullest for you and follow the star, one step at a time.

Maybe you are facing a dilemma in your life right now. Perhaps there is something that is keeping you awake at night trying to figure out

what to do. Maybe life seems overwhelming and you are joining the large number of people who have been saying, “Enough 2016. We need a new year.” You might be hoping that 2017 will be a gentler year, a year with fewer problems. On the other hand, maybe you are among the number of people who are looking at 2017 with trepidation and concern about what a new presidency will look like and what the future will bring.

If this is the case, you can also trust and follow the star in whatever form that may be for you. Jesus came into a world where the government had identified him as a threat while he was still an infant or toddler. Our scripture and our lives are filled with witnesses and promises that God never leaves us to face the future alone. Maybe the star that God is using to light your path is a friend or family member, someone who will listen to you when that is what you need. Maybe the star is an activity that helps you to focus on something else for a few minutes or hours at a time. Perhaps God is lighting your path through prayer, or Sunday worship, or the words of a song or scripture. Whatever it is, follow your star and trust that God will not leave you alone.

It is possible that you feel that your life is going quite well and you awake each morning eager to begin a new day and see what the possibilities are ahead of you. Maybe as good as things are, you are wondering if there is something that you could do, or some part of you that could be better. Perhaps that is the path that God is lighting for you. Remember that God may also be using you to light a path for someone else.

After the wise men came and worshipped Jesus and offered their gifts, they returned home by another road. When we follow the star, we will be changed. Our route will always be different. Maybe following the star

and traveling by a different road will bring us slowly to a place where we are not afraid to follow a dream, or where we are no longer as fearful or filled with grief. Perhaps the different road will find us to be kinder, more accepting, less critical, more understanding.

We can be sure of one thing, every decision we make changes our lives. Every step we take to follow the path that God lights for us changes us in some way. Often that change is so small that we may not recognize it at the time, and it is only in looking back that we can see how we have been changed.

Who are you? “The Wise Ones found what they were looking for by following the lighted path. When we trust the “star” that God hung out for us, we move toward life in its fullest and discover joy beyond imagining. What paths is God shining light upon for you?”ⁱⁱⁱ What steps will you take to follow your star?

ⁱ This is the theme of the Epiphany Plus series “Who are you?” from Worship Design Studio with Dr. Marcia McFee and accessed through subscription to the studio.

ⁱⁱ Worship Design Studio

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