

"Following the Star!"

Matthew 2:1-12
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Micah 5:2-5a
St. James UCC

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What does it mean to follow a star? If you asked most people today, they would probably respond that it means to be fascinated with a movie or television or music star - and to seek to be like them. To follow them might consist of reading all that you can, of seeking out opportunities to be at a live performance of theirs, and of course of wanting to be like them, of seeing them as a sort of hero figure. That's probably the most common way of following stars today, but it's a very different process than what we encounter when we talk about Epiphany, about people who literally followed a new star that appeared in the sky.

You know, people have been fascinated with stars since the beginning of time. You look up in the evening sky and instinctively search for that first star. Children learn rhymes like "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are, wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish to night." What a glorious sight it is to look up in the sky on a clear dark evening and see the mass of stars spanning from one horizon to the next. As we look at such a sky it is a special soul-touching experience. We know that it is a special moment, with meaning and significance for us.

Little wonder then that people have long searched for ways of describing and defining special meaning in the stars and their appearance. What else is astrology? It is one way that people have tried to know the unknowable, to capture and define that which we cannot capture and define, for the stars of the night sky remind us of the vastness of this universe which God has created. It's an effort that is doomed to failure, but in that curiosity about the stars and their meaning, we are reminded again that the stars speak to us of the greatness of God, and of how God is far beyond what we can ever hope to understand.

It should not surprise us then that a group of magi, a caste of educated people who studied the stars back in places like Persia, that they in studying the sky and seeing the appearance of a new, a very bright and special star would find special meaning in that occurrence, that they would study it, seek to understand it, and upon observing that the star seemed to move in a particular direction, to try and follow it, to see where it was leading them, to understand better what the meaning was of this wondrous new star that had appeared in the sky.

We really know very little about these magi or wise men. Popular legend would tell us that there were three of them, and some stories even offer names of the three. Yet, when we look at our scriptures - which is all that we really know - not much is told us about them. It says, "some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem" - that's it, "some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem".

We also know some things about them from the time in which they lived. When we think of traveling great distances, we think of long tiring journeys in a car, or perhaps flying

and spending hours waiting at the airport. Travel can be exhausting and frustrating, but we don't often think of it as dangerous. Yet for these men from the east, travel was dangerous. There were always bands of robbers out looking for unwary travelers. If you were not traveling in a large, well armed group, you traveled at great risk. As well, travel was dangerous because that is a very hot, arid part of the world. Water is found in only a few places. Travelers who are not careful, or who don't know where to find the next water hole, can quickly run into serious trouble.

All of which underscores the fact that travel for these men was a real act of faith. They left their homes and families. They packed up what they needed and took off on a long and dangerous journey, with no guarantees that they would return. They didn't do this to make money or to visit family, rather they left solely on their belief that this star which they had observed was something special, and in its appearance was a message for them to seek.

I don't know if you've ever tried to follow a star. It's always struck me as something that's virtually impossible to do, yet somehow they did it. Yes, they got lost along the way when the star disappeared for a while, and they ended up in Jerusalem asking for directions, but they persisted, and somehow they followed that star and made it to Bethlehem.

For them it was a real journey of faith. When they left home, and even along the way, they had no idea where they were going, or even what they would find when they got there. All they knew was that this was a sign from God, a sign that they believed was given to them, to indicate the direction they should go in, and that somehow at the end of this journey they would find God's Savior come to earth. They were probably very surprised when they got to Bethlehem and found a tiny baby. Particularly since this child was not in rich and noble quarters, but rather stuck out in a stable with the animals because all of the inns were full. They came all this way, bringing precious gifts, only to find that the people of Bethlehem were oblivious to the wondrous occurrence that had taken place in their very midst.

When you think about it that way, the star of Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ child are there as signs for us in that same way that they were there for the wise men. I don't mean that we can look out at the sky tonight and see a star in the sky that we can or should follow. I do mean however, that the birth of Christ, the birth that we just celebrated, is a sign for us that points to the direction God is calling us to travel.

As we journey through life, God has given us guidance and instruction. God is calling us to be faithful and to follow the star of the Christ child rather than to be dazzled by the other stars that are lifted up on television or in the movies. Instead of seeking to be like our favorite movie star or sports hero, we are called to seek to be like Christ, to follow the example that He set in the way that He lived and in the way that He consistently loves us, no matter how difficult it is and how unlovable we act. We are called to live like that with the same commitment and dedication that the wise men brought to their journey, to do it not because of what we expect to get out of it, but rather to wholeheartedly do it because we believe God has called us to travel that road, and even though we don't know where it will lead us, we do know that for some reason God wants us to go there!

As we travel through life, let us always remember what star we are following, and even

when we seem to lose sight of it for a while, let us not give up hope, but continue on - asking others for guidance. The star of Christ is a sign that has been given for all generations - calling us to believe and to follow the path that has been lighted for us by the Christ Child.

Amen.