

## "Follow The Star" (Matthew 2:1-11)

After the winter elementary school concert, a student came into her teacher's room and asked excitedly when they would get to "pet the lamb."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," the teacher replied. The little girl became quite upset and cried, "You should know. They sang it at our program."

Still not understanding her, the teacher calmed her down and asked her to tell exactly what she had heard. The little girl sang, "Follow that star, follow that star to pet the lamb."

Obviously the little girl had misheard the lyrics of the song. The words were not "Follow that star to pet the lamb." As we all know, the words actually were "Follow that star to Bethlehem."

Our Gospel reading for today is about following that star. It's about some so-called wise men who went to great effort to follow that star. It's about some so-called magi who followed a star that no one else seemed to be paying any attention to at all. It comes from the second chapter of Matthew. The text opens up with these words. "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.'"

This story about the wise men is a very familiar one. People of other faiths and people who profess no faith at all know who these characters are. They are a prominent part of every manger scene, and they are the lead roles in Christmas pageants. But in preparing for this sermon, I discovered some things. I knew about the wise men who doggedly followed a star. But I learned that much of what I thought I knew about this Gospel story needed to be re-examined.

Right off the bat, I was amazed to learn that this story about the wise men is not a Christmas story. That's right. It is not a Christmas story. It is an Epiphany story. And it is only found in the Gospel of Matthew. As a matter of fact, Matthew does not give us a birth story at all. Neither do Mark or John. And Luke, who does give us the birth story, makes no mention of these wise men from the East. And the shepherds had long gone by the time these travelers arrived on the scene. Isn't that something?

So when the Gospel writers look down from heaven and see manger scenes, they must all be rubbing their eyes, as if they can't believe what they are seeing. "How can all of those people be in the same picture?" they must be asking. They must be feeling like our family did when one time we got some pictures back, but they were photographs of someone else's family.

It also reminds me of some of the pictures we end up with when our entire family gets together. My aunt Janice does not like having her picture taken. So she ducks whenever a camera is pointed in her direction. And my cousin Brad's son Andrew thinks it's funny to give people rabbit ears. So, we have looked at what we thought would be a good picture of the entire family, only to discover rabbit ears on Grandpa Diehl and the blurred top of Aunt Janice's head as she was making her escape from the scene.

Something else I learned in re-reading this scripture passage is that these men from the East were not afraid to stop and ask directions. That reminds me of a story I once read. A woman and her husband were in the car and were having trouble finding their destination. An argument broke out. She said, "You men are all so stubborn. You just can't bring yourself to stop and ask directions. That's probably why Moses and the Israelites wandered around in the wilderness for forty years. Like you, Moses was too stubborn to stop and ask directions."

The husband's face reddened, but he kept his silence. The wife continued, "And I like what Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir said about you men and directions. She said that Moses led the people around in circles for forty years and then ended up taking them to the only place in the Middle East that didn't have any oil."

Not to be out-done, the husband replied, "Yes, but look at those supposed wise men. They stopped to ask directions, and look at all the mess that caused."

Of course, in a way, he was right. In fact, the original audience to this part of Matthew's Gospel was probably tremendously offended that Matthew even mentioned these wise men at all. In the eyes of Matthew's congregation, these wise guys were the bumblers who had tipped off Herod by stopping to ask directions. In doing this, they endangered the lives of Jesus and all of the other little boys in Bethlehem.

After all, any fool who had the slightest inkling of Herod's raging streak of paranoia would know that going to him with news of a new king would be like tossing a lighted match in the direction of an open gas can.

Sure enough, Herod exploded. The scripture reading continues with these very words. "When Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:1-3). And if Herod's track record showed anything, it was this: when Herod was frightened, people died. He even put to death members of his very own family when his fears had been roused.

I imagine the question about directions was no sooner out of their mouths than these wise men must have sensed that they had made a terrible mistake. But let's cut them some slack. They meant no harm. I mean, they were from another country and did not know about this Herod character. Besides, Herod had his spies everywhere. Even if they had only stopped at a camel fueling station to ask directions, it would have been rapidly reported to Herod.

Furthermore, in asking for directions, the wise men found out that they needed more than just following a star to reach their destination. In stopping to inquire, they were able to learn what God had revealed centuries earlier through the prophet Micah. From Micah, they learned that they needed to point their camels southward toward Bethlehem. And it was then that the star miraculously reappeared and led them to the baby boy in a manger.

I also learned that Matthew's original audience would have been offended by Matthew's story about these magi because stargazers were looked down on by the Israelites. Earlier biblical teachings condemned magi types as idolatrous deceivers, who were to be avoided by godly folk. As a matter of fact, a rabbi who lived just prior to Jesus' birth had actually taught, "He who learns from a magi is worthy of death."

And there is a further reason offense would have been taken for having these men in the original picture with the holy family. You see, these so-called wise men were not from the house and lineage of David. They were outsiders. They were foreigners. They were considered unclean people. Yes, those early Christians would have gasped in shock when Matthew first opened his wallet and pulled out a picture of them standing right there by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. They would certainly have been very upset that astronomers from a foreign land were mingling so freely with the one Matthew claimed to be God's Christ, the Messiah.

Actually, that is precisely what was so surprising and shocking about this Messiah. As a mere baby he attracted these strange stargazers and star followers from the East. And this child would grow up and continue to have a magnetic effect upon all kinds of people. He would attract Samaritan adulterers, and immoral prostitutes, and greasy tax collectors on the take, and despised Roman soldiers, and fishermen,

and women, and foreigners, and other people who were considered unclean, and the poor, and the sick, and the broken, and the down-trodden, and the discouraged, and those who were without a ray of hope.

So this story of wise men is a taste of what is to come. By means of a star, God drew them to Jerusalem so that they could witness and worship. And once they got to Jerusalem, God gave them further directions from the scriptures. Yes, it is a story about following a star and following the teachings of scripture to the place where the very Messiah was to be found.

Amazingly, these wise men beheld a special star and followed it to the ends of the earth. But they weren't just following a star. They were being pulled by the light and strength of God's love. For them, the star was amazing and captivating in that it pointed the way to Emmanuel, or Jesus, who is the Messiah and the Son of God. They felt compelled to follow.

Even Herod felt compelled to follow up on this. He told the wise men, "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" (Matthew 2:7-9). Obviously, Herod wanted them to follow the star for the wrong reasons. He was motivated by fear and anger. But could it be that Herod's advice is good for us today? He seemed to get it that something important was in the works. The chief priest and scribes didn't even get that. Isn't it a stunner that these religious leaders did not even bother to travel south a couple of miles to check it out? Yes, Herod's words remind us of the importance of searching diligently and following the star that leads to Jesus.

But what is the star that we are to follow? There are so many misleading stars out there. Many people today are captivated by and are following the so-called stars of our culture. They are following movie stars and athletes and the rich and famous. But as we well know, few of these people seem to be heading anywhere near a stable in Bethlehem.

Could it be that the star we are to follow today is the Holy Spirit? Could it be that, like the wise men, if we combine following the Holy Spirit with Holy Scripture, we will find ourselves led in the direction of Jesus the Christ? In so doing, might we discover and re-discover that Jesus is still the Way, the Truth, and the Life? And in faithfully following, we wise people might very well find ourselves "overwhelmed with joy," just as the original wise ones were.

And get this. This is the truly miraculous part. No matter who we are or from where we start, the star of the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture can still safely lead

us to this Messiah who can still fill us with his precious gifts of love and peace and joy. This is true whether we start off in a loving family or a loveless house. This is true if we set off from a wealthy household or from a poverty stricken environment. This is true whether we start out alone or with friends. This is true whether we are children, teenagers, young adults, older adults or senior citizens.

No matter where we start on the journey, it is still possible for all to find this remarkable person. We all can still find ourselves in the place where we will encounter Emmanuel, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, the Son of God, the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger with his mother Mary and his father Joseph by his side.

There, we will find ourselves truly loved. There, we will want to present the best gifts that we have to offer. With the wise men, it was gold, frankincense, and myrrh. With us, it could be our worship, our money, our time, our very selves.

Yes, in the picture in God's wallet of God's beloved family, there is plenty of room. There is room for God's beloved Son Jesus. There is room for shepherds, wise men, innkeepers, sheep, cows, Roman soldiers, tax collectors, and Samaritans. And yes, there is room for you and me. God loves us that much. God loves us so much that God prepares a place for us in God's marvelous picture, a place for us in Christ's church, a place for us at his table, and a place for us in God's mansion in the life to come. Truly, there is plenty of room in the picture. Truly, there is more than enough love to go around.

My brothers and sisters, wise people still follow the star. And following the star is not something that is to be done just one day or even one month of the year. Following the star is meant to be an everyday way of life. And once we find Jesus, our traveling companion, we too will be overwhelmed with joy. Thanks be to God for sending us the star and scripture to miraculously lead us to the baby Jesus, Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, the Son of God. Truly, thanks be to God. Amen.

--Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church, December 28, 2008