

The Journey of the Magi

By: Stephanie Doeschot

January 5, 2020. In this sermon, written by Pastor Stephanie and read by Jim Bennett, we look at the journey of the Magi as they follow the star that will lead them to the baby Jesus. They did not know how far it would be or how long it would take. But they were committed to the challenge, and one thing they did have was each other, a fellowship of star seekers.

[This sermon was written by pastor Stephanie, and she wrote it in her own personal context. In the audio recording, Jim Bennett reads it as she has written it.]

*** Transcript ***

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Recently a friend had asked me how we like living in a condo in Columbia, Illinois. We moved over there several months ago. And to be sure, there's a little more driving involved to participate in some of the city's amenities. But there's one thing that we are increasingly becoming aware of and enjoy a bit more by being in a smaller city, and that is the ability to gaze at the wide, expansive sky that fascinates Phil and me both day and night. We see so many interesting cloud formations, sunrises and sunsets, and so many more planets and stars than we could see on walks in our former neighborhood. I guess stars have always held a special interest for me. I remember gazing up at the Milky Way with wonder as a child, and that was well before we had such sophisticated telescopes that could tell us just how extremely far away these heavenly bodies were from Earth.

Today, we just sang a song called "Follow the Star." And probably like you, I was curious as to how far the star could have been that the Magi followed so long ago. Also, the number of times that the verbs in our lessons today use the word "see" or "saw" or "observed" and other variations that indicate the possibility of seeing the light that comes from God through the readings of Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, and in the gospel lesson, causes one to wonder how that could be so. It seems that following a guiding star and recognizing the light that comes from God would call for some extraordinary vision. Something like, as an optometrist might say, 20/20 vision. Because when I look at stars, I cannot imagine seeing a moving star that stops and lingers right over the place where Jesus lay, according to that often sung carol "The First Noel." As is often the case in biblical interpretation, it helps to spend more time wondering about the deep meaning than getting all hung up on what could possibly be so.

An author I like, Barbara Brown Taylor, wrote once upon a time there were some very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries, minding their own business, when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imagination, but they were wise enough to know that it didn't matter. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug that they had been waiting for all their lives. I like that, because her thoughts take us to a mystical awareness of God leading in inexpressible ways, far more compelling and interesting than we often make this story out to be. And along with that she discovered an ancient Syriac text from

the second century that shed more light for her. One where the Magi were and how they were able to be guided to that place where they could worship Jesus, the newborn king.

Brent Landau, a translator of that ancient text, revealed in his work that the Magi who came seeking Jesus might not have been primarily astronomers at all. He indicated that the manuscripts reveal they were first and foremost mystics, spiritual people who had dedicated themselves to a life of prayer and seeking after God's leading. As this tradition goes, generations before, these mystics were given a promise -- a prophecy of sorts -- that they were to guard and protect. They waited and looked forward with longing to a time when it was written that a star of indescribable brightness would appear, heralding the birth of God in human form. Every month of the year for centuries, the order of the Magi carried out its ancient rituals in expectation of that star's arrival. They ascended their country's most sacred mountains and prayed in silence at the mouth of the cave where they kept their prophetic books. And whenever one of the Magi died, a son or a close relative would take his place and their order continued through the ages. Regardless of the exact details, we can learn something from the Magi: their readiness to respond when they sensed God's beckoning them, and their commitment to engage on a journey to a place which called for them to rise to the challenge of following the unknown.

The season of Epiphany. Epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation." When it comes as a light leading the Magi, it compelled them to follow and trust, not knowing the consequences in advance. They did not know how far they would journey. They did not know how long the expedition would take. They did not know what kinds of circumstances they would encounter along the way. Most often when God illumines our hearts and minds to follow with faith into uncharted territory, we do not know, but we will find that it's not a smooth path without obstacles. After all, the journey of the Magi describes how the little interlude with King Herod could have derailed the whole journey, yet it did not.

Many of you might be familiar with J. R. R. Tolkien's work *The Fellowship of the Ring*, either from the book or the movie version of it. Even if you're not, I'd like to share a scene with you. And the story features a wise wizard named Gandalf who assures the young hobbit Frodo Baggins that he is indeed the one destined to carry the evil ring back to its destruction in the fires of Mordor. No one would have guessed that it would have been Frodo to be the one chosen for such a task. The creatures Tolkien invented named hobbits were not particularly brave as this particular hobbit Frodo, and he even was afraid and unsure of his ability to respond to that calling. But there's something about Frodo -- his loyalty to friends, his inner strength, and his innate capacity to resist the ring's evil -- that made him the right one. "The ring came to you for a reason, Frodo," Gandalf tells him. "There is comfort in that." "I wish the ring had never come to me," Frodo despairs. "I wish that had never happened." "So do all who live in such times," Gandalf replied. "But while we cannot choose the time we live in, we can choose how to respond to that time we are given." Then, in perhaps the bravest words uttered by hobbit or human, Frodo says at last, "I will take the ring, but I do not know the way." It is often like that in the journey of faith. The Magi chose to follow the star not knowing where it would lead. Frodo chose to carry the ring, though he didn't know where it would take him. In ways large and small, we all say yes to things we cannot fully comprehend. "In order to reach a distant shore," writes the artist Andre Gide, "one must consent to lose sight of the shore from which we depart for a very long time."

It makes you wonder sometimes. With all the challenges present for us in this day and age, following God's lead, how is it possible that it can be done? What is there to guide us in this life, into this year 2020, when we do not know the way -- especially when we are honest enough to be so very aware that our own vision is far from perfect 20/20 vision? We have, first of all, the star that is whatever instrument, circumstance, revelation, or calling it is and inspires us to begin our journey in the first place. It is certainly our baptismal identity, as part of letting our light so shine, that calls us to that following -- a light that illumines the love of God to others. Since following that light of Christ was never meant to be a solitary venture, we find that along the way we need help from other sources. The Magi's star, remember, led them at first to Jerusalem, to the palace of Herod, which was certainly not their ultimate destination. They had come to what seemed like a dead end. So they inquired of others for guidance. We may wonder why asking Herod had had to occur. But Herod passed on the question to those who can consult the ancient scriptures, and that brought them to the answer they needed to take the next step. Yes, there was to be a newborn king, they were told, in the city of Bethlehem, according to the prophet Micah. So off they went to Bethlehem, where they did indeed find what had been promised. Epiphany. The direction of the light of Christ. Illumination, through prayer and seeking after God, including scriptural reflection, brought the Magi to their destination.

One other important factor played a role for the Magi, and is equally important for all of us who seek to follow the light of Christ. The Magi also had each other. They operated as a fellowship of star seekers, as Frodo did with his friends who also accompanied him. There is wisdom and guidance in community for us all. The way of following Christ that is laid out for us all through the New Testament resides in the power of the community bearing the light of Christ. It is when we come together as two or three or more that the Lord promises to be in the midst of us. As we come to learn and pray and struggle together with what it means to follow the light of Christ, we deal with our struggles and our uncertainties together. Christ was quite clear that his followers were not to be alone, that in this life and on this path, we needed one another. It was on God's people together, Isaiah proclaimed, that the light had come. Arise, shine, for the glory of the Lord has shown upon you all.

With boldness and confidence in the Lord, who is the light, may you, may we, may the congregation of Christ Lutheran follow the star of God's leading into this New Year, 2020. As you do so together as a unit, a body of Christ's followers seeking after God through prayer and meditation, listening to and heeding the guidance of God's holy word, and encouraging one another when the way seems somewhat unclear. Our vision may not be, as optometrists say, "perfect 20/20," but there is I think an important awareness that comes with this particular New Year -- in the world's understanding but also in our congregation's understanding. But the one who does possess perfect vision will guide us and show us the way that leads to everlasting peace. It's where we, like the Magi, will find Jesus and worship him with overwhelming joy.

So, please rise and join with me in offering a prayerful response through our next hymn, number 314, "Arise, Your Light Has Come." Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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