

Following the Star

By: Meagan McLaughlin

January 22, 2022. When was the last time you set out on a journey with only a single star for your guide? Today's sermon is about the journey of the magi and the truth revealed in Epiphany.

Readings: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#), [Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14](#), [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

*** Transcript ***

When was the last time you set out on a journey with only a single star for your guide? When I'm going somewhere I typically want to know where I'm going, how to get there, and what I should do and expect once I arrive. The idea of following a star sounds a little crazy, even terrifying. If the wise people had invited me to join them, they might have had a hard time getting me out the door. They, however, seem to have taken their mysterious journey in stride. They were likely astrologers, so it was probably not such a strange thing for them to follow the guidance of a star. When the star disappears, they stop to ask directions, and continue onward. The wise ones follow all of this, seemingly without question. Nothing else seemed to matter.

From the start, logically, nothing about this journey makes any sense. A mysterious star that shines and disappears. A king with ego issues and ulterior motives. The words of scribes and chief priests who serve the king, not the greater good. The star again. And finally, a dream. No GPS, no map, and truth be told, when they set out the wise ones didn't even know where they were going.

The wise ones were seeking the one who would be, as Isaiah describes, a light for all nations, a light that will guide exiles home. The psalmist tells us that this baby who will be king will bring justice for all who are poor. He will deliver those who are oppressed, have pity on the weak, redeem those caught in violence. Given this promise, nothing mattered but following the star, no matter where it led them.

January 6, 2021, as I was preparing my Epiphany sermon for last year, I watched as many of you did with a mix of shock and horror as thousands of armed people climbed walls, broke windows, and entered and interrupted congressional session in what was by definition a coup. I was sickened as I heard the pain of colleagues and friends of color who know just how differently this would have turned out had the coup been led by black folks or other people of color. Epiphany tells us a story about three kings, following a star, traveling from far parts of the earth to see the radical truth of what God is up to. And once again, this year, on this first anniversary, I am hearing the story of Epiphany teaching us about truth, empire, and God's persistent and faithful guidance and work in this world.

Epiphany literally means, in one definition, a sudden revelation or insight. An awareness of a truth that wasn't apparent before. I think about when I realized that I was not, and never would be, perfect — leaving me at once horrified and giddy with relief. Or when I saw my parents as actual human beings for the first time. (Yes kids, this might happen to you, too!) I think about those major national events of my lifetime that have changed forever how I see the world: the explosion of the Challenger, the attempted assassination of President Reagan, the attack on the World Trade Center, the two full years of pandemic life, and of course, the events of January 6, 2021.

In her blog *Journey With Jesus*, Debie Thomas writes, “During this brief liturgical season between Christmas and Lent, we're invited to leave miraculous births and angel choirs behind, and seek the love, majesty, and power of God in seemingly mundane things. Rivers. Voices. Doves. Clouds. Holy

hands covering ours, lowering us into the water of repentance and new life. In the gospel stories we read during this season, God parts the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the extraordinary.”

Epiphany is about truth revealed, and that's not always comfortable or welcome. Because often God's truth challenges us to see things differently, to change our minds on things we thought we were certain of. And often, God's truth reveals threats to the empire, the powers and privileges that shape our world, and truth be told, make us feel safe. The three kings brought news to Herod of what they saw God doing in the world — bringing a new king — and that threatened everything Herod had. When the wise people, who Herod tried to make allies to his empire, failed to return to tell him where they could find Jesus, Herod sent his soldiers to kill all the babies to prevent this “new king” from taking power. And in our country, we have witnessed empire threatened, willing to use any means to hold onto power — even if it means, figuratively speaking, burning everything.

The good news is, Herod, the empire of Jesus' time, didn't succeed in taking power. And neither, Christ Lutheran family, will the empire of today. The journey will not be easy, and we're a long ways from the end of it. But still, God is here, among us. The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God's work in this world cannot be subverted, or prevented, or even delayed. Empire notwithstanding, God continues to guide us, sometimes in the most surprising of ways.

Following the star is no simple task. For one thing, a star is not exactly a neon sign. It's so easy to get distracted from the journey. But if we take a moment to think about what the star means, we know, just as the wise ones did, that nothing else matters. We live in a broken world that is in desperate need of mercy, justice, and redemption. We need the God who came to us in Jesus, who will bring us home, and show us what's really important. We need the God who stands with those who are most impacted by poverty, oppression, and violence, and who calls us to make that a priority, above anything else. We need the God who reminds us that if one person suffers, we all suffer. Nothing else matters. We need to follow the star.

God is with us on this journey, and gives us the courage and faith to take it. But God does not follow the star for us. That's our job. There's a time for waiting and watching and wondering, but this is not it. Epiphany is a time to focus, and to follow the star that leads us to Christ.

Each time we take an action to bring truth and justice to our world, we're claiming the promise of the one who set that star in the sky to guide us. When we walk the road with someone who is in pain, we open our hearts to the God who promises healing and forgiveness. When we share the abundance of this world with a neighbor, we are following the star to Jesus, whose mercy will bring a day when no one will be without. When we stand against oppression, and are willing to change so that oppressive systems fall even if it's not convenient for us, we are proclaiming that there is room on the road for everyone. The wise people knew, and we know, that the star leads to hope not just for some, but for all.

I still don't know for sure if I would have gone with the wise ones, if they had invited me to follow the star with them, but I hope I would have. Because the star, as hard as it may be for us as human beings to keep track of, and as scary as the unknown journey might be, reminds us that God has always been faithful, and always will be faithful, to God's promises. On our own, we would never find the way. We are not in charge of this journey. We're followers, ones who trust in God, who has never failed us. We know the mercy, justice, healing, and love of God, and we respond by taking a step in the direction the star is leading us, not knowing where we will end up. And today, some 2000 years later, the journey of the magi continues. We too follow that star. And at the end of worship today, we will ask God's

blessings on the journey as this new year begins. Nothing else matters, as long as we follow the star.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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