

Follow the Star

Dear congregation!

As a family drove past a nativity scene in front of a church the 5-year-old asked about the meaning. "That is Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, there in the manger," the mother replied.

A few blocks further on they passed another church, where a scene was depicting the journey of the Wise Men. "Who are they?" the little boy asked.

His mother replied, "Those are the Wise Men, who are looking for the Baby Jesus."

"Well," the little boy said, "they won't find him there. He's down at the other church."

The annual observance of the birth of our Saviour is almost over – we celebrate Epiphany next week, recalling the visit of the Wise Men, which ends the liturgical celebration, following the "Twelve Days of Christmas." That's right, there are twelve days of Christmas, not only one! Yes, I know that already the excitement of Christmas has begun to simmer. So, let me encourage you to do this: Before you take down the tree and start packing up the ornaments and other miscellaneous odds and ends, take a moment to reflect on the Star of Bethlehem.

The idea that heavenly signs marked the births and deaths of great leaders was widely accepted at the time Jesus was born. What the three wise men saw excited them, even enough to make them drop what they were doing and follow the star. There is a wonderful message for us already right there – these three, met God in the midst of doing what they did every day: they were at work. God is not limited to meeting with us in a certain place (a church) or at a certain hour (09:30 AM Sundays). God can and does speak to us ANYWHERE and ANYTIME.

But one of the things that has intrigued me about this story is the incredible wrong turn these three men took as they neared the end

of their trip. Instead of following the star to Bethlehem, they stopped off in Jerusalem to ask directions of Herod (which has caused someone to suggest that this is why these men are famous in the first place – they are the only men in history ever known to stop and ask directions). In a way the visit with Herod might be expected though: after all, they were convinced that they were coming to welcome a new "King of the Jews," presumably Herod's baby son. Oops. With the benefit of hindsight, we know the trouble that slip caused. But the message for us is in noting where the directions to get them back on track came from: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" and the response, "In Bethlehem in Judea; for this is what the prophet has written..." They found their way again when they went to scripture. Where do we find guidance and hope for our lives? The vast majority is found in the WORD of God.

Dear congregation, we stand at the threshold of a new calendar year. Who knows what twists, turns and detours lie ahead and what effect they're going to have on our lives? The New Year that's ahead of us, is dark to us in the sense that we do not know what it is going to bring. Life is full of changes. Some we choose – like going off to study, or moving to a different location, or starting a new job. Some we don't choose – like experiencing the death of a loved one, or the failure of a marriage, or the devastation of a lost relationship or any kind of storm that could be coming our way. Sometimes it must get very dark in order for us to recognize that there is a bright star and to experience the warmth of its light. The Good News is that God is faithful through all the changing circumstances of our lives. Like the magi, God will lead us home, but it's bound to be a different journey than we had expected, perhaps with twists and turns and detours along the way. Again, the Good News is that God is constant and faithful to lead and guide us, even when our life journey takes us in a direction we didn't necessarily choose to go.

Of course, we're not the first people to face the uncertainty of an unknown future. Like those who've gone before us, scripture beckons us to look to God to order and provide.

The Psalmist writes,
"God is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? God is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalms 27:1)

Jesus told his disciples,
"Therefore don't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?' 'What will we drink?' or 'With what will we be clothed?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first God's Kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself." (Matthew 6:31-34)

Paul told the Philippians,
"In nothing be anxious, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 4:6-7)

Here's what I hope you'll take home with you today: You can't predict the future, but you can choose how you'll respond to it: You can worry about what's going to happen next, or be confident and trust God to lead the way. Yeah, that doesn't sound very Lutheran, does it? Let's put it this way: You can worry about what's going to happen next, for to worry is just human - just don't worry so much that you forget to also trust God to lead the way.

For that to happen we need to focus more on looking ahead than on looking back. The magi were given a clear warning not to return to Herod. The message here is that we should not look back, not go the same old road as before if we know it is harmful and dangerous! Look ahead! In the text, it says that the Star went ahead of the three wise men, not behind them. Don't look back if what's behind you is

harmful and dangerous, if what's behind you keeps you from moving on and journeying towards God's preferred future for you! Because it is there that true joy and abundant life is waiting for you. When the three men found the Christ child they were not only happy, they were overwhelmed with joy! True life and joy awaits when we keep following that Star of God's Love and Grace!

So, what does the Star of Bethlehem mean for us today? First, it confirms the past. Something happened on that cold, winter night so long ago, and that something was that the God of all creation came to earth as one of us. No longer need we speculate about where God is, whether God is with us or not. Yesterday when I stopped at a filling station the petrol attendant asked me: How was your Christmas? Very good, very blessed, and yours? I replied. Oh, very good. God is with us now! Yes! Indeed! God is with us now! And always! It's a simple message that everyone can understand. God stepped down from his lofty throne to walk among us and share our hurts and our hopes. He will never leave nor forsake you!

Martin Luther writes,
"This is the Christ, God's son most high,
Who hears your sad and bitter cry;
He will himself your Saviour be,
And from all sin will set you free."

The Star of Bethlehem confirms the past. It also affirms the present. Jesus didn't just come to earth, live a few years, and die. He came to earth to proclaim the reign of God and invite all who would be part of it; then he gave his life as a final act of self-giving love to break the power of sin and death forever. To this day the light of His love lives in our hearts and minds leading and guiding us onward.

The Star of Bethlehem confirms the past; it affirms the present; and it re-confirms the future. God didn't just set the creation spinning in space and leave it to chart its own course. God has a plan, and God will not be satisfied until his will is accomplished and every particle of creation is reconciled to himself and each other and united in perfect peace and harmony. As part of God's wonderful creation, God also has a plan for you and your life and will not be satisfied until He has accomplished it.

Of this we can be sure: Just as Christ has come in the child of Bethlehem; and just as Christ comes to us in the serendipities of everyday life; so, Christ will come again in final victory to rule over all creation, to the glory of God.

So, we can see that the Star of Bethlehem is an important symbol. It confirms the past, affirms the present, and reconfirms the future. It wants to shine in your heart throughout the coming year, and remind you that, just as God has given us signs of Christ's coming in the past, so will God give us signs of Christ's presence today and of Christ's final coming in the future.

Look to the Star of Bethlehem and know that Jesus has come in the fullness of God's peace, joy, and love, that you might have the promise of eternal life, both now and forever. Then let the Star of Bethlehem guide you towards the promising future God has in store for you. And let it shine in you, for others to see and be attracted to its warmth and light to the glory of God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard and guide your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus, today and tomorrow.

Amen