

January 7, 2018

“We Will Follow the Star”

Matthew 2:1-12

Just over a month ago we started a journey together - preparing to celebrate Christmas. We entered Advent. Today we end the holy season of Advent and Christmas, celebrating Epiphany, which is marked by the visits of the magi, wise men from the East.

Though we place wise men in the manger scene, they were actually not at the manger together with the shepherds because they came late, travelling far from the East, following the star. They were most likely Babylonian astrologers.

As I was reflecting on today's Gospel reading, I was amazed again how God appears to us and sends a message in the way we could understand it. To the shepherds in the Christmas story, God sent a message through the angels in the sky. To Mary God sent a message through an angel Gabriel that she would bear a son. To Joseph God spoke through a dream and assured him to marry Mary because she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. To the wise men God sent a message through a star and later through a dream.

For astrologers, who study stars, sending God's message through a star was a perfect way to reach them. For they were the experts on stars. When they saw the bright star shining in the western sky, the wise men left for the west with expensive gifts that were appropriate to be given to a king. Two thousand years ago, gold, frankincense and myrrh were worth (in today's equivalents), six hundred, five hundred and four thousand dollars per pound, respectively. They were very valuable gifts.

Of course, wise men went to Jerusalem, the ancient city, where King Herod lived and where his palace was. They greeted King Herod, thinking that King Herod would know where the new born king was. They may have thought that King Herod's son was the new born king of the Jews.

King Herod, a governor over Judea appointed by the Roman Government, was known for his tyrannical rule. He also murdered members of his own family to rise to and keep his political status. He was threatened by the news that the king of the Jews was born. So he gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. Citing the prophecy from Micah, they said,

“Bethlehem. “Bethlehem means ‘house of bread,’” defining Bethlehem as a small farming village.

“You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Micah)

Herod secretly called the wise men to find out when they first had seen the star so that he might learn the time of the baby’s birth. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Search carefully for the child,” and told them to come back to him to report it so that he could also go to “honor him.”

We know what was on his mind. He wanted to erase the child as he used to do with anyone who had threatened his status and position.

Being commissioned by the king, the wise men left. Matthew writes, *“Look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was.”* (2:9)

This passage might be troublesome to some in a modern age. How could a star move across the sky and then stop? Stars don’t move. The earth rotates.

The Gospel of Matthew was written somewhere between 80 AD to 90AD, way before the age of modern science and Enlightenment. The gospel of Matthew is not an astronomy book, neither ancient nor modern. The birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is Matthew’s explanation of the confluence of exceptional events associated with Jesus’ birth. Simply put, it is written through the eyes of faith.

What Matthew wanted to convey is that once these wise men found the new king, “they were overwhelmed with joy.” Where they found Jesus was not a palace. It was not a mansion. I imagine it was an ordinary humble house in a small farming village.

I wonder what the reaction of these wise men was when they found the house where Jesus was. Did anyone of them hesitate to enter since it was such an unlikely place for a king to be?

Or maybe they didn't care about the look of the place because they finally reached the destination of their long journey and were so happy about it. Maybe there was some aura around the house.

Or by then they had sensed that this king was an extraordinary one, beyond any human expectation, and simply received and followed the celestial lead through the star.

Maybe it was like treasure hunting. Joy was increased when the treasure they were searching for was found in an unusual and unexpected place.

Whatever doubt or hesitation they may have had or didn't have, Matthew writes simply, *"They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."*(2:11)

Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route. In other words, they followed the message from God and dismissed Herod's order. They chose heavenly guidance over earthly order. They gave honor to the heavenly course over human plan that came out of greed and human interests.

The courage, wisdom and persistency that the wise men exhibited are amazing. They didn't give up their long journey, whatever challenges they may have had on the way, to honor the unusual king that was revealed by the bright star they had seen in the east.

They followed the heavenly lead that was shown in the star and the dream above the earthly order of King Herod. They were not afraid of any consequences that might fall on them by ignoring the King's order.

They were wise enough to see the true motives of King Herod. They were wise to honor something that was beyond what they saw - a humble house, a poor young couple, who were a carpenter and an ordinary village girl from Nazareth. They were wise enough to sense that something bigger was taking place here - that there was something divine working here.

Today is the first Sunday of 2018. We were given a fresh new year ahead. Following the example of these wise men, let's persevere in following the Star however unusual the situation or unexpected places the Star may lead us to this year.

Following the example of those wise men, let's stay wise, with help from God, to discern what is of God and what is of the earthly interests.

Following the example of the wise men, let us be courageous to choose to follow the Star, however strange or odd it may look to others.

The star of wonder, the star of light, will continue to lead us, proceed us and guide us to the perfect Light, Immanuel, God with us. Amen.