

# **“Follow Your Star”**

## **Sermon: January 6, 2018**

Based on Matthew 2: 1-12

The question has been asked a hundred times. What if the wise men had been wise women? According to folk wisdom, women would have asked for directions in the local family store instead of going to King Herod. Women, they say, would have arrived on time to help deliver the baby. In fact, some claim, they would have cleaned the entire stable upon arrival and brought something practical rather than gold, myrrh and frankincense, because, what is Mary going to do with those gifts? Sell them on the black market? Wise women would have brought food and clothing, even hand-me-downs. Dear women, without whom the world and the church could not exist, bear with those aloof wise guys, bear with their idealism, bear with their absent mindedness and dreamy recklessness. Sometimes God uses people like that, even today – to lead us off the beaten path... to cross boundaries, to find Christ our Lord.

There is of course a fine line between wise and foolish. From a practical point of view, the journey of the wise men was clearly foolish. Can you imagine the domestic scene a few hundred miles to the east? “Honey, I will be gone for a few months... My buddies and I have found this star and we are going to track it down. It shall lead us to a new-born king.” Truth be told, these men were lucky that divorce wasn’t on the table for most women back then. What are they doing, traveling to a foreign land, following an elusive star, bringing expensive gifts to an unknown baby, a poor child, born in a little shack? Had they nothing better to do with their lives than following objects in the sky? The best thing we can say is this: these men, searching for something extraordinary, possessed a rare gift: the ability to recognize a special moment in life, a moment when it’s worth risking something. How many times in history have people looked for something special only to find another thing that turned out to be even bigger and much more valuable? Columbus wanted to find a new passage to India and bumped into this new continent later called “America.” The magi wanted to find a newborn king and bumped into the king of the universe. I wonder what we might bump into if we set our sights on bigger things.

Of course, it’s always risky to leave familiar surroundings. Once we have established a nice warm home, it’s hard to get us out of there. Most people don’t venture out of their comfort zones unless they have to, because of things like work relocation, a divorce maybe, the death of a loved one, or a deep felt unhappiness with the status quo. But even then, on those less pleasant journeys, when you are forced to redefine your life and yourself, it is well worth to seek that guiding star. The road may be bumpy or non-existent and lead you far from home, but trust that the God who led people through the wilderness and the wise men to a tiny stable, will also manage to lead you where you belong!

One of the earliest films in film history was a film called “Follow your star” from 1938, in which a factory worker leaves his job to go on stage as a singer and then becomes destitute when the show he’s in closes. The movie has a bold message, saying that following your dreams will not nearly always bring instant success and happiness, but it may still be well worth it. Follow your star!

And there is yet another bold message in this story of Epiphany. Have we noticed? With the arrival of the wise men our nativity scene has suddenly become rich and diverse. Up to this point, the Christmas story was exclusively Jewish: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, probably even the angels looked Semitic. I can relate to that because, in the same way, most traditional Christian artwork that I grew up with always looked European. My image of Jesus and the disciples was shaped by people with skin as white as mine. The scenes of the Last Supper looked like Sunday lunch on an oak table in Renaissance Europe. One day when I went for a visit in the home of an African American family in Philadelphia I saw for the first time a scene of the Last Supper with all dark skinned people. Jesus, Peter, James and John, they all looked differently. It was a revelation for my limited view of Jesus and his disciples up to that point. Someone was opening a window for me.

The arrival of these oriental characters, who followed a star in the universe, makes a statement. What was already hinted several times in Scripture, is now confirmed in the Nativity scene. With the inclusion of the wise men, God posts a statement that says: **Christ is not for insiders only!** Our Christ is not reserved for Christians alone or for any Christian group. He is, as John said, the light that shines in the darkness of the world.

You can also say: God opens the window of religion. Let some fresh air in! Include strangers in the birth of Christ! And the most ironic part? This story is recorded in the gospel of Matthew! Of all the gospels, Matthew is the one most specifically written for Jewish people, with more quotes from the Hebrew scriptures than any other gospel, with the strongest tendency to cast Jesus as a new Moses, with details about Jesus Davidic ancestry tree and so on... And yet, here in the second chapter of the gospel of Matthew, fresh faces are introduced to the greatest story on earth: people from the orient, Persian perhaps or Babylonian, who come and worship the child, in other words, people from the same cultures that had fought Judeans for centuries! Our manger scene becomes suddenly rich and diverse and controversial. With the arrival of the oriental visitors, God speaks to us, clearly and unmistakably: **Christ is not for insiders only!**

So, what happens in this story is what often happens in life when people of different cultures venture out of their comfort zones and meet one another, exchange gifts, exchange words, attempt to understand the other's language, habits, mores. We all become richer! We all are changed in some way. We all learn something. I talked to my sister-in-law in Germany just before Christmas. And she said, oh we are now renting the upstairs apartment to three young Afghan men from the refugee program. We are having them over right now, singing Christmas songs. So I didn't keep her on the phone for long since they had guests. But picture three Afghan men singing "Stille Nacht" in front of a Christmas tree with German decorations. It might have been a little strange for them, the words, the tunes, the "ch" sounds, but also nice. Let some strangers in! The manger scene in that house instantly became diverse. Christ is not for insiders only. If there was a clear sky that night, I am sure you could see a star shining brightly; and if you looked really closely you would have seen it: it was smiling.

**Amen.**