

“Follow the Star”

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Sunday, January 7, 2018

Isaiah 60:1-6

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother;

and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts., our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, and bless, and transform all of them into the Living Word of Jesus Christ. A Word that feeds our faith, comforts our hearts, challenges our comforts, and guides us into service. May that Word be at work among us, now and forever. Amen.

As I was telling the children - one of my objectives this morning is to try and erase if you will, the image of the three wise men that most of us carry around in our heads. Not because I have anything against little children - one dressed in blue velvet with gold trim, and one in green and one in red. Oh, [laughter] I'm getting it now. I'm not against them, sort of, riding little camels going across with their gifts or kneeling down and offering them. I just want to, sort of, get in front of this passage a little bit and think about what was happening just before they came from the east and who they were and, kind of, again - what was going on. First of all, the scripture doesn't say that there were three of them. There were three gifts that were given but the scripture gives us no answer to how many came. It just is the word wise men in plural. So, I think if they came from far away across the desert and it took them weeks or months to get somewhere, like Jerusalem, there's a decent chance that there wasn't just three of them. There was a whole caravan of people that were coming from wherever it was to visit this child or at least to follow the star.

Also, this idea or the wondering about where, exactly, did they come from? Where in the east did these wise ones come from? It seems that a lot of people who have studied this and consider the notion that there were wise people who were reading text, and looking at astrology, and discerning what stars were telling people what believe that these people came from Babylon. They came from Persia or what's modern-day Iran. They came from Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian kingdom which is 59 miles south of Tehran. So Iranians, if you will, came to Jerusalem to ask and inquire about a new king. I don't know if you've heard in the news lately but there's a lot of tension in the Middle East. Wondering about nuclear armament and certain treaty or understanding with the Iranians, what that means. Will it be upheld? What do we do with it? Do we ignore it or keep it? You may have heard of a little bit of agitation that's resulted from the President naming Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. People are freaking out about that. There's conflicts between the Israelites, the people of Israel now and Palestinians, Muslims, and Jews, and on and on. There's always conflict in that area and these people that came from Babylon where the Israelites had been taken into bondage are now coming back into Jerusalem and inquiring about a new king. So there's a little bit of tension going on in that journey and in that inquiry that's happening when they get to Jerusalem. Now, while they're preparing, they're studying scripture and some people speculate that what they were studying were the texts of the Hebrew people that the Israelites brought with them when they came into bondage, living in Babylonia, being put into services for the Babylonian people. They brought their sacred texts with them and these scholars have studied them, found them, learned from them, and they're paying attention to the faith of the Israelites, the sacred stories, and are following the wisdom that they've discerned from those texts.

Again, while all of this is happening with the wise people from the East, the wise ones from Persia or Babylon, there's something interesting that's going on with Herod. Herod, when he was a young man, was the nephew of the King of Jerusalem, of Judea. And there was a squabble between the king and a cousin and the cousin wanted to become king, so there was a lot of infighting and Herod in the year 400 BC, or, excuse me, 40 BC, 40 years before the birth of Christ, went to Rome and asked the Romans to help reinstate his uncle as the King in Jerusalem. And he stayed there a year lobbying for his uncle to become king. And after a year, the Roman Senate did something that probably Herod thought was really bizarre, they voted and they made Herod King of the Jews. And so he had to go back and tell his uncle and his cousin that they were not king, he was. The uncle and the cousin weren't happy and there were years of fighting, but eventually, Herod consolidated the power and served as King of the Jews for about 30 plus years, before these wise ones from the East show up and start asking questions. Where is the child who's been born King of the Jews? So there's political intrigue, the sort of theological or historical intrigue of one people being held in bondage, but bringing their texts. Another people studying them and realizing that there's truth there and then being willing to follow that truth and go across the desert and follow a star and trust that when they got there someone

would speak up and help them find out exactly where they needed to go.

I know a lot of you have kids who have gone to college and when I read this passage and thought about the plans that these wise ones had after they'd done a lot of studying to pick up everything and to travel across the desert on camel to see some king, maybe, following a star. I thought, man that's like a lot of kids' plans right after school. They don't really know what they want to do. They want to just figure it out and have an adventure and off they go. We call them wise men. I'm guessing their mother's called them something else [laughter]? "You're doing what?" Why? Because a star is-- oh, Lord." But they go. But they go, and they ask their questions. And Herod, who's lived for 25 or 30 years as king, is freaking out. The people all around him are freaking out because they know that the scripture says that the true king will be born someday from among them somewhere. And so, everybody's buzzing. And then Herod calls the scholars together, the scribes. "Okay. We're at Bethlehem." So he tells them to go to Bethlehem and off they go. They follow the star. The star stops. They find the child. They're overwhelmed with joy. Part of me wonders if that joy comes also not just from seeing Jesus Christ the child, but also from realizing that their crazy adventure of leaving their homeland after good careers and jobs and going across the desert to follow a star actually worked? They find this child and they kneel down and they worship him and then they share their gifts. And then having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod and tell where they found the child, they go home by another road. So the question that we have or the invitation from these wise ones from the east is do we still have the courage? Do we have the courage to listen to our dreams and to follow stars or is that just something that happened once and was a long time ago?

As I was trying to discern my faith in God, I got invited to talk to a Jesuit at Seattle University where I was attending. As I sat with this Jesuit, I was sharing a story with him about the different things that I was trying to figure out and I remember he told me of his story of coming to faith. He said that one day as a young man he was out walking down the sidewalk and he stumbles across an acorn in the crack in the sidewalk, and he has this instant recognition that in that acorn is an oak tree. And he said right here everything changed. I began to tell him about some dreams that I was having and other questions. And one of the things that he told me was, "David, pay attention to your dreams. Pay attention to your dreams." And he helped me to discern, that, actually, the voice of God was speaking through dreams.

Years later, I found myself as the associate pastor on Bainbridge Island in the state of Washington. As the associate pastor, my job was to go and do hospital visitation. As I've shared before, most hospitals in that area are in Seattle and so the visitation required a ferry ride across Puget Sound from Bainbridge Island to the mainland and then a bus ride up the hill to where the hospitals were. On one particular morning, I had gotten my cup of coffee at the best little coffee stand which was at the ferry terminal, walked on, and sat down at the window to watch the water as I prepared to go do a visit. Whoever designed the ferries did a masterful job because the two seats at the windows face each other. They are close enough together that you can have a conversation and they are far enough apart that you can ignore the person who's sitting opposite you. They are perfectly situated. As I sat down, not even being aware of my surroundings, I notice that the person I was sitting across from was a young man that I recognized from church. To be honest, I knew his wife and his two daughters better because they were regular people at church. He was one of those that sporadically attended. I sat down. He recognized me. We started chatting about something, I don't know what it was; nothing that really mattered. And as I watched him talk I could see the wheels, the gears in his head grinding, working. Something was going on with this guy. And being a pastor, I have sort of, this weird like, "Hey, seems like something's going on. What's up?" And he said, "Well, I got a job offer a couple days ago, and I'm not sure what to do." This gentleman is a lawyer, and he, at that time, worked in a very small firm and he had one client. Years before, he had gone to a fundraiser thing in New York City and got seated at a random big table, and at that table was a queen, a living queen, not of England but an actual queen. They hit it off, started talking. Over the course of the next year or so he called and tried to win her business, and long story short, he became her legal representative in the United States; one client.

A big firm in Seattle wanted him to join them because they wanted that business and the possible connections that she had to other people of wealth. He had had the interview. He said everything went great. The people were nice. The money was unbelievable. The chances of partnership were automatic, and the future, because of his partnership, long-term, his wife and kids and their kids would probably be set, is what he told me. And I said, "Well, it seems pretty obvious. What's the problem?" He said, "Last night I had a dream. I was at work at the new place. I was at the

desk doing work. Everybody was in the office. Everything was fine. Everyone was happy. Things were moving normally throughout the day. And then it came time to go home. And I picked up my stuff and I walked out the door, past the other offices around the corner and I could not find the door. I went to the other side of the office and there wasn't a door. I went all the way around and couldn't find the door. I just kept walking in circles and I could never find the door. And then I woke up."

And then I heard the voice of a Jesuit in my head say, "David, trust your dreams." And so I said to this young man, "I knew a priest once who told me, 'Always trust your dreams.' That God speaks to you still through them." The ferry docked, he got off the boat and went on with his life. I didn't really see him very much. In intervening years he kind of continued his regular habit of attendance. His wife and kids still came to church fairly regularly. Several years after that his wife's silhouette was in the doorway of my office. She simply asked, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Yes." She came in and shut the door, sat down and I said, "What's up?" And she looked at me and said, "I think I want a divorce." And I said, "What? Why?" "I never see my husband." And I said, "Oh no. Did he take the job?" And she looked at me and said, "What?" I said, "Did he take the job at the big firm?" And she said, "Yes." He decided not to listen to his dream. The wise ones are not special. God continues to speak to all of us through stars and dreams. And the invitation is simply for us to trust that it is God speaking. Trust that it's not something that's made up or in our heads, but that sometimes that voice or that image is, in fact, the presence of the Christ child. It is in fact light in the midst of darkness, and that light wants our goodness. Amen.