



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

www.goodshepherdwi.org

2nd Sunday after Christmas

January 5, 2014

“To Follow a Star”

(Matthew 2:1-2)

Rev. David K. Groth

“... Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him’ (Mt. 2:1-2),

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You have poured into our hearts the true Light of Your incarnate Word. Grant that this Light may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

I have to confess, about two weeks ago, in the Green Bay Packer part of the brain (. . . you know where that part of the brain is: it's a tad too close to the religious part. You have to maintain some kind of fire wall between them), in that Packer part of the brain, I had assumed the season was statistically over. They had just lost to Pittsburgh and I had assumed a playoff berth impossible. In my ignorance, I was already thinking to myself, "Just wait till next year." We get all those guys healed up in the off season and no one will be able to stop them. "Wait till next year."

I know how Packer fans think. We maintain this pilot light of hope. It's a hope that is often frustrated, for sure, but an enduring hope nonetheless. Last Sunday, after that spectacular victory against our archrivals, I thought to myself, "If I die tonight, I die a happy man." But today, I'm hoping for more. But if the unthinkable happens and the Packers are thrashed, it won't take long before I will be thinking (along with many of you), "Just wait till next year." Woven into that phrase there's pain and bravado and whole lot of hope.

Imagine the hope lying within the hearts of these magi. Hope would fuel their journey. Without hope, they would never have even begun the journey.

Much has been written about the magi, but little is actually known. They are mysterious, strange visitors from another country, another culture, another race and religion. They are non-Jews in an otherwise exclusively Jewish story.

There are people in every culture who seem attuned to the spiritual, the holy and the mysterious. Magi were these kind of people. They were first century religious scholars and consultants. Kings retained them for advice on military and political affairs. Businessmen hired them to give advice on the economy. Wealthy families sought their advice on marriage contracts.

Matthew says they went to Jerusalem and started asking around, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” What actually did they see? As a child I used to think of it as some kind of supernatural fireball about a mile high in the sky that they followed until it eventually came to rest directly above the manger. But another compelling theory comes from Johannes Koepler. He was an astronomer and brilliant mathematician, a Lutheran who lived four hundred years ago. He figured out the planets all move very predictably, like a very precise clock. So you can mathematically work backwards in time and determine what the night sky looked like on a certain date. He noted that every eight hundred years there is an unusual planetary meeting in the sky of Jupiter and Saturn. From earth’s vantage it looks like one star drawing close to another. And this convergence of Jupiter and Saturn would have occurred at about the time Jesus was born.

Many would not have noticed this convergence, but magi would have. Magi believed in stars. And though normally the Bible condemns astrology, I believe God graciously used astrology to reach out to these Gentile scholars. Jupiter, at that time, was the symbol for the king. Saturn in that world was a symbol for Palestine. Jupiter approaching Saturn therefore means a king enters Palestine. And so the magi head to Jerusalem (the capital city of Palestine), and start asking around, “Where’s the new born king?” It’s an intriguing theory.

But without the benefit of the Old Testament prophecies, how could they have known this one lying in a manger, in such humble estate, was not only a king, but even worthy of their worship? Joseph and Mary appeared for all purposes to be just a couple of peasants trying for all their worth to scratch out an existence. How could the magi have known their son was worthy of their worship and their treasures?

They are from the east, Matthew says, that means Persia, which very well may mean Babylon. And you remember what happened there. Centuries before, the cream of the crop of the Jews was exiled into Babylon. With them came their priests and prophets and teachers, and their Old Testament scrolls.

In short, these magi may have been influenced by Old Testament prophecies pointing towards the birth of Christ. That's what magi did after all, they studied religions. They are experts in comparative religion. This is what they were known for, exploring religious texts. And I think they saw something in the Old Testament Scriptures that so captivated their attention and their hearts and their hopes that they were willing to risk it all on this new-born infant.

It certainly wasn't greed that motivated their journey or simple curiosity. I think in their hearts they were keeping alive a hope they had deep in their souls. . . that they were people of hope – impatient with the world as it was, and longing for a better world. And the Old Testament prophecies convinced them this infant was the one who would bring it about. I think the Word of God broke through, and they recognized in it certain truths about God and man that they had never seen anywhere else. I think they knew this journey would end on bended knee before Jesus. After all, they didn't come empty handed. They came prepared to meet the Messiah. These hopeful men were willing to wage their time and energy and resources to seek this Jesus and to welcome him and worship him.

Don't you wonder what their wives said when

they broke the news they were going to follow a star? What would your spouse say and your friends and colleagues say if you decided one day to close out the savings account and follow a star? Surely they faced resistance . . . within and without. But their hope prevailed.

In a way, it sounds adventurous to just get up and go, wherever the star takes you, but there are some logistics to consider. They are a *long* ways from home, especially in first century miles. The weather can be sharp and extreme, hot days characterized by withering winds . . . cold nights. Pack animals, (including camels, if they rode camels), can be very uncooperative, unpleasant, unmanageable, foul-smelling beasts. And the little things that make traveling and camping sometimes challenging. . . unfriendly towns, dirty little roadside inns charging inflated prices, especially if you're from Babylon . . . sand getting into everything, sleeping in snatches, dangerous, unpatrolled roads.

It makes many wonder why they did it. But I think they have told us why, in their actions, when they knelt down before the infant Jesus to worship him, and when they gave him their gold, frankincense and myrrh. Years later Jesus would say, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." The magi were putting their treasures where their hearts already were.

There were, of course, alternatives. They didn't have to chase after this star. They could have continued their comfortable way of life back home. There were other options, you know for men of their resources, other choices. They chose the way of hope. They chose to follow a star.

The opposite of following a star is to live without hope; to hope for nothing for the world, the nation, our city, our own personal lives. Some say this hopelessness is the spiritual scourge or epidemic of our age. Some say that a major characteristic of people today is a sense of hopelessness, that there's no way things can get better politically, environmentally, racially . . . there's no way things will get better and they'll

probably get a lot worse. In place of any such hope, they have decided simply to make and spend as much money as they can. Perhaps you can see traces of that mentality in your own life. When we stop hoping, something important has died within us. For people of faith, there is always hope, for we a God who can stir up his power and grace and make things happen for us. As the children of an almighty and gracious God, we always have hope. If we don't have hope, we should be ashamed. If we don't have hope, we are also to be pitied. Hopelessness doesn't point just to a crippled faith. There's a physical component to hopelessness as well.

The American Heart Association says despair is as bad for the human heart as a pack-a-day smoking habit. "Steps should be taken" their journal says, "to change the cardiac patient's situation so they gain hope and become optimistic." Steps should be taken. What steps are you willing to take in the New Year to regain a life of hope?

God never promises to send another Bethlehem star for you to follow, nor do we need another. We have the bright light of his Word. It is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. I can think of no other better way to become a people of hope again than to be in God's Word, for it brings to light all the promises of God for his people. Outside of God, there really is no long-term hope for ourselves or the world. But the light of God's Word will remind you that Jesus once promised, "All things are possible for one who believes" (Mk. 9:23). In the Bible, there are constant reminders that we should be a hopeful people. Psalm 43:5, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me. Hope in God!" And from Ps. 130, "O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption" (v. 7). And from Romans: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (15:13).

Finally, isn't that the point of those wonderful words from the ancient prophet that we heard in the Old Testament? Isaiah was writing to a depressed and discouraged people, a people lacking of hope. And he gives them a star to follow: "Rise, shine, your light has come."

That's what the magi did. They followed the star to Jesus and placed their hopes squarely on him.

Not everyone saw the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn, but some did. Not everyone recognized the Bethlehem child as God's Son and Savior, but some did. Not everyone sees in Jesus the hopes and dreams of all the years, but some do. Not everyone is willing to wager generous portions of energy, time, money and life itself on Jesus, but some still are. Not everyone will put their hope and their faith and their trust in him as Savior. Not everyone will love him. Some will.

Whatever you face in the days, weeks, the year ahead . . . listen: Rise. Shine. For your Light has come! Amen.

