

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

January 3, 2021 – EPIPHANY SUNDAY (YR. B)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Follow the Star*”

Isaiah 60:1-6 (The Lord shall bring the Light of salvation, and gifts will be given to the Savior)
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 (A vision of God's peace under a righteous king)
Ephesians 3:1-12 (St. Paul testifies to the power of God's grace)
St. Matthew 2:1-12 (The wise men visit the child Jesus, to honor and worship Him)

A family was driving into Fredericksburg, Virginia, for a Christmas season get-together. As they passed by the Anglican church there was a nativity scene out front. The youngest boy asked his mother, “What’s that?” She replied, “Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, in the manger.” A few blocks farther on, they passed the Methodist church, where there was a scene depicting the journey of the Magi. “Who are those guys?” the child inquired. This time, his dad answered: “They’re the Wise Men who are looking for the Baby Jesus.” “Well, they can’t be too smart,” the boy quipped, “because he’s down the street at the other church.”

Many legends have grown up around the story of the wise men, one of which is that they were “three kings.” St. Matthew’s account does not say there were three visitors to Jesus, or five, or ten, or thirty. The idea of three kings came from the three gifts that were given and the value or expensiveness of each gift.

Some have suggested there were actually four kings, but the fourth one gave a fruitcake, so he was dropped from the story. And rightly so, in my opinion. When I used to subscribe to Harry & David’s website, my password involved the term “door stop,” which is what I think fruitcakes are best used for.

Tradition—not Scripture—has even assigned these three kings names and vivid descriptions: Caspar, young and cleanshaven, has a Middle-Eastern complexion. Balthazar is a bit older, and depicted as a Black African with a small beard. Melchior is the senior of the bunch, usually portrayed as fair-skinned with gray hair and a long beard.

The truth is, we really don’t know who they were, and the Bible isn’t much help. St. Matthew refers to them as “wise men from the East,” using the Greek word, *magoi*, from which we derive the term “magi.” They were most likely astrologers—which at that time, meant more than charting a person’s fortune. The field also included various sciences, including astronomy, which may explain why they would have observed and then become so excited about finding an unusual star in the sky.

As the men later said to King Herod, “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.” The idea that heavenly signs marked the births and deaths of great leaders was widely accepted in Middle-Eastern culture. And what these men saw intrigued and excited them enough to leave their homeland—for a journey of possibly more than a year!—to follow this star.

They were probably from Babylon (present-day Iran) and it was going to be a very long journey to the town of Bethlehem, in Roman-occupied Israel.

But for these Wise men, this was the most important journey they would ever take. Nobody and no thing was going to stand between them and following that star. They made a dramatic commitment of resources and time to search for the new king. And you and I both know that the gift of time is one of our most precious possessions ... one that we need to give to Jesus on a daily basis.

These three, or four—or however many *magoi* eventually met God lying in a cattle trough—were in the midst of their normal daily routines and work when the Lord gave them a sign and called these Gentiles, these non-Israelites, to Himself. There’s a wonderful message in this story for us: God does not limit Himself to meeting with only certain people, in pre-determined places, at specific times. He can, and does, show up everywhere and anywhere, at any time, when His purpose needs to be carried out through human lives.

Throughout Advent, we heard the Gospels' urgent reminder to always be prepared, constantly awake or alert, watching for God to enter into our lives, our hearts and minds, our plans and priorities. The story of the wise men shows us how important it is to be willing to *act on* what we discern comes from God. These astronomers could have noted the appearance of the great star in their charts, and done nothing more.

But those guys dropped *everything* to go find Jesus! They added commitment to their conviction. They put feet to their faith. When God presents *us* with a new opportunity or a fresh challenge, are *we* willing to rise up and follow, to begin on an uncharted journey of faith?

Father Jeff Smead, a retired Episcopal priest, writes: "One of the things that has intrigued me about this story is the incredible wrong turn these men took as they neared the end of their journey. Instead of following the star to Bethlehem, they stopped in Jerusalem to ask directions from Herod. Which has caused some to suggest that this is why these magi are so famous They're the only men in history known to have stopped and asked directions."¹

In a way the visit with Herod might be expected. After all, they were on a quest to welcome a new 'King of the Jews,' which they may have thought was Herod's newborn son. When they asked where this anointed one, or "Messiah" could be found, it would seem even Herod did not know his Scriptural prophecy, because his courtiers had to inform him—quoting Micah 5:2—that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Whatever God is calling you to do, the answers—as for these folks—are to be found in the Bible.

Once the magi knew what direction to go in—thanks to the prophet Micah—they were back on course. They found Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea and they laid before him their gifts and they worshiped him. The gold presented to this infant king symbolized his royalty. Frankincense was an expensive resin burned in the Temple during prayers; and therefore referenced Christ's divinity as well as His high priesthood. Myrrh, another costly resin, was used for embalming, and prophesied His sacrificial death. Together, the gifts referred to "King, and God, and Sacrifice"—three ways we often refer to Jesus, even now.

So, what can we learn from this familiar story so many love?

First, Just as the magi were willing to drop everything to seek Jesus, we need to be ready to meet God in the midst of our everyday lives and activities, and then rise up and follow the star.

Second, like them, we can find grace to add commitment to our convictions, and look toward the light—Jesus Himself—for further direction.

And third, if we are willing to put feet to our faith, to rise up and follow the star, then we, too will encounter Christ, want to give Him our best gifts, fall down before Him, and worship Him.

And last, but not least, we need to remember that Scripture, God's Word, is a major resource for divine guidance in our lives. B. I. B. L. E.—Best Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

Where might following the star lead you? To a transformation of your life by the Holy Spirit? To a renewing of your heart and mind for fresh action and ministry? To a deeper and more meaningful relationship with that child in the manger who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords?

Undoubtedly, the wise men had challenges along their journey to Bethlehem. It couldn't have been easy, and it probably took more time than their patience allowed. We, too, have our ups, downs, and detours, and off-the-road skids, in our spiritual journeys. But just as Jesus was waiting for them at the end of their trip, right under that star, He's there for us, too.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Son, the Light of the World. Help us to add commitment to our conviction, and feet to our faith. And, like the magi, to rise up and follow the star until it leads us to Your beloved Son. Then, let us offer Him our best gifts, and worship Him with all our heart, mind, and strength. It is in His name that we pray. Amen.

¹ Adapt. J. Jeffrey Smead, "Rise Up and Follow the Star," 4 January 2013, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/rise-up-and-follow-the-star-epiphany-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-wisdom-172452>> 7 December 2020. Used with permission.