

## **“The Light Shines”**

**Psalm 23:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

January 8, 2023

Rev. Thomas Pilgrim tells a story which caught my attention a few days ago. He writes “It was a few days after Christmas. A mother was busy cleaning up the den, putting everything away, taking the Christmas tree down. Her son came in and saw her and said, “Mama, what are you doing?” She said, “I’m putting all our Christmas stuff away.” He asked in reply, “Why are you doing that?” She answered, “So everything will be back to normal again.” His response to that was, “Mama, I don’t want things to get back to normal again.”

On this second Sunday after Christmas, we have the thought in our minds that Christmas is over, especially considering that we’ve greeted a new year since the Christ child arrived. Soon, if not already, the refrigerated shelves which held Eggnog for so many weeks at the grocery store will be repacked with Cheez-Whiz and premade mashed potatoes. Soon, if not already, Christmas trees will sadly be littering the roadsides, undecorated and waiting for the landfill. Soon, if not already, we’ll be returning to a more usual schedule at work. Soon, if not already, in-laws and relatives will be packing up their things and returning home. And at some level, there may even be a relief in it all coming to an end. There is, after all, a comfort in having things return to normal. Things get back to a by-the-numbers routine. We know what to expect. We can anticipate what lies around the corner.

But, sometimes, I think we rush away from it too quickly, do too good a job at cleaning up after Christmas. We pack away the mystery of God becoming flesh. We carry out to the trash gazing in wonder at the Christ along with the crumpled up wrapping paper. We shove in the attic the idea that God can and will act in the most amazing and routine-upsetting ways right there alongside the lights and the ornaments. We yield our hearts and our minds to a rationalism that’s been taught to us since we were children. We return to that world where Mere science lays behind all quote-unquote mystery. Knowing everything about anything is only the right experiment away. We’re jaded by the idea of miracles. We laugh uproariously at the whiff of anyone being cured by faith. These things don’t happen, we think. Not really. Yet in our human wisdom, we’ve drained the mystery out of life. We’ve divorced ourselves from the call of an invisible God who speaks to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We’ve hardened our hearts through the influences of a rather unholy trinity of logic, rationalism and empiricism.

And so, it’s fitting that here, as we wander away from the lights of Christmas back into the darkness of our own minds that we’re confronted with an alternative by Scripture. *“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.”* We’ve called them Kings and numbered them a paltry three but Matthew’s text will have none of that. Instead, Matthew tells us that these magi, these wise men come to Jerusalem having followed a star across the vast expanse of Asia. And right there, we get a glimmer of the appropriate response to the mystery of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

Now imagine just for one moment that you’re a bright, wise, well-off far-easterner. You’ve got servants, families, responsibilities. You’re running in whatever rat-race was being run back there in the first century and then, all of the sudden, a star appears. Would your first instinct be to pack everything up including your wife and your children and head off to Jerusalem to greet a king? Be truthful. It probably wouldn’t.

Not really. After all, there are the camels to tend to, the children to get to their practices. Plus, you’ve got to make an honest living after all. No, we probably wouldn’t drop everything and begin wandering to the far reaches of the known world at the time. We wouldn’t consider it...unless our hearts told us that this was no ordinary star nor was the king it announced no ordinary king. We wouldn’t move an inch from our routine unless we knew in the depths of our souls that this star meant something else, something bigger than our everyday-normal-9-5 existence. Only then would we saddle up the camels, pack up our tents and our belongings and our frankincense, gold and myrrh and begin the arduous journey to Jerusalem.

And then, just when you're getting close you stumble your way into Jerusalem. You dare to do what no men are supposed to every do...ask for directions. "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." Ah, but instead of the kindly service station attendant who'll point you in the right direction, you encounter the ancient world-equivalent of Snidely Whiplash in Herod. Herod, flummoxed by the words of three wise men calls his trusted council together. He's frightened and with good reason. Presently, men and women call him King of the Jews. If there's another one running around, then that means that his reign of terror is quickly coming to an end. And that provokes fear and anger.

Herod's counselors return telling him that the Christ child will be born *"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.'" So now in his fear and his anxiety, Herod simply must know more. He calls the wise men from the East back into his presence. He needs more information from them so he asks them the exact time the star appeared. Herod feigns interest like some kind of smarmy con-man seeking to ingratiate himself to a hapless mark. Then, having heard their story, he sends 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."* We all know what kind of homage Herod wants to pay this child. Soon, he'll send armed soldiers to kill every male child in Bethlehem to eradicate this other king who he thought sought to usurp his power. To some, the arrival of this Christ child means paying homage with the precious stuff of life. To others though, this Christ-child upsets the equilibrium and for that reason alone, needs to be eradicated.

Down through the ages, Christ always provokes such black and white responses. Some wish to honor, love and obey Him. Others wish to wipe His name entirely from the scene. Some would celebrate Christmas, opening their hearts and minds to the amazing possibilities of the God to save His people from the present darkness. Others would prefer simply say "Happy Holidays" and make the entire affair just a sentimental time for shopping and family and feasting.

Even though Herod's aims are different from theirs, his advice is good. *"Go and find this King of the Jews"* and that's exactly what draws these wise men out from the splendors of Jerusalem back out into the rocky hills around the city. Their hearts have been captured by this luminous light. They've travelled hundreds of miles and they will not be averted from their task. *"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."*

I think that's my favorite verse of the whole story. When they reached the place where the Christ-child lay in those bands of cloth lying in a manger, they were overwhelmed with JOY. The journey was worth it. All those days and nights of being away from home, all those countless hours spent upon a camel's back. All that time filled with a seemingly never-ending horizon and the apparent futility of following a star to begin with all suddenly and completely make sense. Their hearts fill with the glory of the moment. Now I don't want to belabor a point but when they reach Christ, they are overwhelmed with JOY. But I don't think things are much different for us. When we do those things that Christ would have us do, we see his kindly eyes meeting ours in a loving gaze which thrills our souls. When we get to the place where Christ is, there is nothing but joy awaiting us. The wise-men experienced it many years ago and we can too.

Sometimes, the journey to get there won't feel remarkably easy. If you're anything like me, then there are definitely days when following Jesus Christ doesn't make a tremendous amount of rational, logical, empirical sense. After all, who wants to NOT resist an evildoer? If you're struck on the cheek, who in their right mind wants to turn and offer their other? If someone takes the coat off your back, do you really want to give them your cloak as well? Who wants to walk two miles when one is sufficient? Does anyone really want to give to everyone who begs of them or love their enemies? And yet somehow, when you're confronted with the mystery and wonder and awesomeness of God, you just can't help but pay Him homage. *"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."*

These gifts were precious. This Christ child was worthy of them. The church has traditionally taught that each of these gifts was freighted with spiritual significance. Gold, fairly obviously, signified riches. Frankincense, which is an aromatic resin of a tree, was burned during worship and thus carries the idea of worship and praise to the almighty God. Myrrh, another type of resin used typically in burial symbolized the bringing to God of our sufferings. In these three gifts, symbolically, the wise men laid at Jesus feet the entirety of their lives. The good and the bad. The precious and the painful. They brought everything to him because they knew him to be everything.

As Christians living in this two thousand and twenty-third year of our Lord, we're called to do likewise. We're to follow a star, trusting in the Lord our God and bringing to Him the totality of our lives. Nothing can or should be held back as we encounter the one King of Kings.

I recall a couple in from a church I served who moved away years ago. They were such a sweet couple. They'd tried for a great many years to get pregnant without success. They were nearing the end of their money having undergone all sorts of fertility treatments. They were, quite sad by what seemed to be the denial of their desire to have a family. One last measure was taken. A statistical unlikelihood to work. But not only did it work, the couple was astounded to hear by their physician that she was actually pregnant with three fetuses. And accompanying that announcement came the cool sound of logic. "It would be better," the couple was told "far more likely to lead to a favorable outcome, to selectively reduce the number of fetuses. Let's give one child a fighting chance for survival. You've waited so long for a child, let's do the best we can so that you can have one" the couple was told. They prayed about it. I can only imagine how hard such a decision would be to make. And yet in faith they told the doctors, "God has given us three children and we trust Him." We all know the end of this story. Right now, there are three, twelve-year-old triplets somewhere in the state of Ohio with an awful lot to be thankful for whether they know it yet or not.

The voice of Herod cries out in our minds to resist doing such things, taking such chances. As we follow the star of our Lord and what we're doing doesn't make a whit of sense to people without faith, we're going to hear their voices. And the chief appeal of the forces of darkness – reason. "It doesn't make sense" we're told. "Why would you ever consider acting that way?" "You don't have to do that" we're told all with the cool appeal to our higher minds as though the hope is we'll come to our senses.

Ah, but when you're following a star, you're not that easily waylaid from your journey. When you're following the Christ, you take all things in faith and know that when He appears, all the struggle, all the sacrifice, all the surrender of time and talents and money and possessions will fully and totally make sense as our hearts swim in the deep water of God's joy.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.