

“The Light of Christ”

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January 4, 2015 Epiphany Year A

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

This morning we read the story of the three kings – and Ernesto, Solo, and Michael dressed up in royal attire and carried gifts down the aisle to symbolize the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But according to Matthew, they weren't really kings. People started calling them kings because of Old Testament prophecies like the one Vicky read from Isaiah 60 (vs. 3) this morning: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” There's also a blessing in Psalm 72 (vs. 10b-11) that says “... may the kings of Sheba... bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.” That's a Psalm written for the coronation of King Solomon.

The actual word in Matthew is “magi” which today we translate as “wise men.” And there weren't necessarily three of them. There could have been 12, or only 2. All the story tells us is that sometime after Jesus was born (and it could have been a year or two later), some wise men came from the east to visit Jesus. They came to a house, not a stable. They brought him three gifts. And in the story, only Mary, his mother, is mentioned as being there, no Joseph, shepherds or angels.

These magi were probably Gentile astrologers who looked for signs in the stars. But astrology was more of a science then than it is today. Matthew did not give the names of these magi, but traditions and legends have identified various names for them. Syrian Christians called them by Persian names. In the west they are known as Melchior, Caspar (or Jasper), and Balthazar. They may have all been great sages from India. But some Chinese Christians say at least one was from China. And Spanish tradition says they represented three different continents: one from Asia, one from Europe and one from Africa.

In any case, according to Matthew, the magi traveled a long distance following an unusual star which they believed to be a sign of an unusual birth. And there is some evidence that there may have been remarkable activity in the skies around that time.* If that's true, it certainly could have caught the attention of some magi, and maybe even prompt a journey. According to Matthew's story, the wise men pieced together enough information to connect these happenings in the sky to the birth of the king of the Jews, the leader of God's people. So they set off on a journey to see for themselves.

The journey took them into the big city of Jerusalem, where they met Herod, a jealous and murderous ruler. After consulting his scribes, Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem where again they followed a star to a house. It says that when the star stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. They entered the house, discovered the child with his mother, Mary, and knelt down to honor him.

These wise men probably traveled for months, maybe even years, before they could see what they were looking for. They weren't certain where they were going or what they would find. They certainly did NOT have Google maps with all the landmarks worked out in advance, or a voice telling them exactly where to turn. They had to pay attention to what was happening in the sky above and the earth below, and make adjustments as they collected other information along the way. They probably took a few wrong turns and detours, and maybe had many days and weeks of just plodding along.

But isn't that how it is in life? How many of us know exactly where we are going to end up and how we are going to get there? There are always good and bad surprises along the way, and decisions to make, and it's not always clear what would be the best choice. What should I study in college? Should I take this job or wait for a better one? Can I trust this person as a friend? Should I get married? Should I end my marriage? Can I make the time to serve in the church, or do I need to focus on something else? Should I try to stay in my home, or should I sell it and move? How we decide these questions can change the course of our lives. Sometimes there's a clear right or wrong. But sometimes we only know in retrospect, as we look back, whether the decision was a godly one or not.

Some people believe that God directs the smallest details of their lives, and they are always sure they are doing God's will. But I don't think that's how it worked for the wise men. They weren't just following a star. They had to draw on their own knowledge. They also consulted scribes and kings. And they paid attention to their dreams. And who knows, there may have been more than one way to get to the house in Bethlehem. What mattered is that they ended up in the right place, on their knees in the house, overwhelmed with joy with this encounter with God. And they had to change their plans on the way back because they learned of Herod's murderous intentions.

God can and does guide people. But part of that guidance may involve listening to others, using our own judgment and paying attention to our dreams. And we have to be willing to change course along the way, even if we believe God was guiding us from the beginning.

Last year during Lent some of you read the book “Practicing Our Faith.” The book describes 12 different spiritual practices to guide and strengthen our identity as Christians. And chapter 8, by Frank Rogers Jr. is about discernment. Discernment is a spiritual process of recognizing and choosing which path will lead in a godly direction. If you are ever struggling with a decision, I recommend you read that chapter. It won’t answer all your questions, but it may get you started. We still have several copies of the book in our church library, so you can just take one and let me know.

The chapter on discernment summarizes a few processes Christians have used throughout the ages to discern a faithful path when faced with decisions in a confusing world. Any true process of discernment will involve considering different options. If you assume you already know the answer, or refuse to think about options that might challenge you, it’s not true discernment. With true discernment you have to have an open mind. You take seriously the advice of trusted friends and advisors. And you prayerfully consider issues of faith, weighing what you understand of God’s will for humanity and the world. And you will pay attention and honor your deepest feelings, not to be confused with desires for fortune or fame, because your deepest feelings are often what are most in tune with God. In the long run, a godly path will bring you life, wholeness and health, and produce fruits of the spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness (or generosity), faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. If you end up feeling alienated, confused, hateful or despairing, you may need to change course.

The poet Rainer Marie Rilke once wrote, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

What do you do when God’s will is clear, but you just don’t want to do it? In times like that we can look to Jesus, who wrestled with God’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was crucified. He disregarded his clueless friends and said to God, “Not my will, but yours be done.” This path took him through suffering and death. But on the other side was life.

Most of us never get an obvious star to guide us, and we may feel we are stumbling along, never quite sure which direction to go. But we do have the light of Christ. If we truly seek God and leave our hearts open to truth, justice, mercy and love, we will end up in the right place, even if we find ourselves traveling by a different way than we expected.

So as we enter this New Year, may we seek the light of Christ, and prayerfully live the questions. And know that whatever path we take, God will be there to guide us and lead us into life. Amen.

* “Wondering About the Star of Wonder,” story on WSNBC website, based on John Mosley’s book, “The Christmas Star,” 1987.