

“FOLLOW THE STAR”
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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Matthew 2:1-12

Years ago, there was a comedienne named Gracie Allen, whom some of you may remember, but for those of you who don't know about her, she teamed up with fellow comedian George Burns (to whom, by the way, she was married) – and played his scatterbrained wife! Well, once Gracie called in a repairman to fix her electric clock. He fiddled around with it for a minute and then turned to Gracie and said, “There's nothing wrong with the clock. You just didn't have it plugged in!” To which she replied, “I don't want to waste electricity, so I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is!” (Gerard Fuller, *Stories for All Seasons*, p.52)

Well, as cute as that story is, I think we do much the same thing that Gracie did with that clock – we plug some things in when we're interested, and then forget about them the rest of the time. And I think we do that with the main characters in this morning's Gospel lesson – the Magi.

Oh, we love the Magi – at Christmas time. They're the perfect ending to a perfect story. They wrap up the whole birth narrative of Jesus. After the whole journey to Bethlehem, the “no room in the inn” scenario, the birth in the manger, and the visit by the shepherds, it all wraps up with the visit by the Magi. Then, in our minds, Christmas is over, we take down the trees, we pack up the nativity scenes, throw away the discarded wrapping paper, put away the gifts, write the thank you notes – and then, on to the new year ahead.

But this morning, I want to say to all of us – “Not so fast!” If we just look at the journey of the Magi as a momentary blip on the radar screen of the Christmas story, if we just look at it as another example of people coming to kneel at the feet of the newborn Savior, and nothing more, we're missing the power of their story.

Because their story is so much bigger than that. And it's pretty amazing, as well. First of all, the Magi joined the cast of “unlikely” characters that God called to the manger. If you were casting a play surrounding the birth of the Savior of the world, you would likely pick important people, wouldn't you? People the world viewed as influential. Yet, God's cast of characters, if you will, was made up of the most unlikely choices – a teenage girl, betrothed to be married; a man who worked with his hands, a carpenter, her fiancée; an innkeeper, who offered a stable to his guests; and a group of dirty, dusty shepherds. Not exactly people who would be considered important in the society of that day and time. Yet, God chose them for his most important work of all.

And then, God chooses the magi, learned men, men who spent their time observing things, observing signs and wonders in the universe. Stranger than that, and I might add, more important to the story, they were true outsiders. They weren't part of God's chosen ones – they were foreigners.

Who would have thought that they could play such an important role in the story? Yet they did, and why? Because their coming to Bethlehem, their kneeling to honor and adore Jesus, their giving him their most precious gifts was a sign to the world that this baby, this Jesus, this Savior came for all the world, not just some chosen people – all the world. And that was, and is, life changing.

Before Jesus, there were God's chosen people, and then, all the rest. Now, in and through Jesus, the doors were flung open and God's love was available to all. So, this morning, let's spend a few minutes together looking at these magi and what they did – and – what we can learn for our own lives from their story.

First of all, they spent their lives looking for signs. That's what they did – they watched, they listened, they pondered, they learned. They didn't rush through life with blinders on, which sadly, many of us tend to do – oh, not because we don't care, but because we're too busy or distracted.

It's because they were watching they saw the bright star in the sky. And it was because of their studies that they knew that star meant something so special, that they had to follow it.

I don't know about you, but I'll confess that I need to slow down more and spend more time looking for signs and seeing signs. Let me share with you something I read this week that might help all of us to be more intentional about that.

It's from the writings of John Philip Newell and he talks about how “in the Celtic world . . . there is the practice of what is called reading from the two books of God – the big book and the little book. The big book refers to the universe, to the creatures, to everything that has been spoken into being. The little book is the book of Scripture in which we listen for God speaking to us through those who have gone before, our mothers and fathers in the faith. Their experiences of God, their mistakes and failings, as well as their hopes and wisdom are given to us so that we too can learn the way in which God speaks in the human heart and in human history. And what we are invited to do (Newell says) is listen to these two books in stereo, to the big book and the little book. If we listen only to the little book (scripture) and ignore the big book (creation) we may miss the vastness of the utterance of God in all things. And if we listen only to the big book (the expression of God in the universe) and ignore the little book (scripture), we may miss the intimacy of the voice of God speaking in the secret places of the human heart.” (Online, “The Light Within All Life,” John Phillip Newell, 1/6/13)

I love that. God puts signs all over the place for us to see, and invites us to see them – in the big places and in little places. Perhaps, in the new year ahead, we

would do well to keep those words in front of us – big book and little book – that we might spend some time and be intentional about looking, and intentional about striking a balance between looking around us for signs from God in creation, and looking in the Bible for words from God that speak to our hearts.

If we do, I know we will find ourselves drawing closer to him.

Writer James Moore tells the story of an American professor who went to London to do some post-doctoral work, and while there, he would go to worship at the University Church of Christ the King. Sunday after Sunday he worshiped there, and while he liked all of the worship, it was the music that touched his soul the most – and not just the music offered by the choir, but by the congregation as well – and particularly, by one area of the congregation. It was a group of people that seemed to be especially gifted musically.

So one day the professor asked the minister who those people were. Turns out they were the cast of *Godspell*, which was playing in London at the time. The minister went on to say that many of the young people had had no acquaintance with the Christian faith before they were cast in the play. But then, night after night, they were singing words from the Christian gospel, and it started to have an impact on them. So they looked for a place (in Moore’s words) “and a people who cared about those words, believed those words, followed those words, lived those words, and they had found that place and those people here at that church.” (James W. Moore, “Celebrating God’s Keys to Real Life,” *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It*, p. 61)

Sounds to me like those young people were seeing signs from God in the big book – the beauty of creation found in music, and in the little book – the words of holy scripture they were singing. And those signs led them to God himself. Oh, may we journey into this new year looking at the signs God sends to us all the time.

A second thing from the story of the magi that I would commend to all of us is that they helped lead others to Jesus. How? By keeping him safe, by sending the holy family home by another way so that Herod would not kill him. When their hearts were opened to God’s love for humankind in Jesus, when they knelt in adoration and felt God’s arms of love wrapped around them, they wanted others to know it too.

And so do we. We say it in the very mission statement we claim for our church – “to know Jesus, to be known by Jesus, and to make him known to others.”

How will we do that this coming year? How will you do it?

I want to tell you about someone who does it in both a private and public way. Most of you won’t be surprised when I say his name, but I’m sure you’re surprised I haven’t talked about him already – because his name is Carson Wentz, quarterback of the Philadelphia Eagles.

Carson is a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, and pretty much everybody knows it, because he does nothing to hide it. He grew up in church but it wasn't until he went to college that he became active in his faith. And he did because a teammate on his football team shared with him about his own faith. Not in an overwhelming or threatening way, but in a quiet, invitational way. He invited Carson to read through the New Testament and they could talk about it.

And just that invitation from one person led Carson Wentz to a deeper relationship with the living God, which he now lives out in quiet, but profound ways for all the world to see. If you've ever seen him when he's not wearing a football uniform, you won't see him wearing a symbol a sponsor is paying him to wear, instead he usually has on a hat or shirt with a symbol on it that stands for "Audience of One." That, for Carson Wentz, says it all – he plays for an audience of one, he lives for an audience of one – and that audience of one is Jesus Christ.

As it happens, this year the Eagles team is filled with many such faithful Christians – of all races and denominations. They have regular Bible studies together and they have weekly Chapel services together. One of them was even baptized in a hotel swimming pool while they were at an out-of-town game!

Wentz doesn't go around trying to convert everyone. Rather, he says his goal is to create a loving and supportive environment built on respect for all cultures and ways of life. "I'm going to be genuine," he says, "I'm going to be authentic with believers, non-believers – it doesn't matter. I'm going to love on them. I'm going to treat them all the same. I'm going to respect them." (On-line, BeliefNet.com)

My friends, we've seen over and over again how, when young people are polled as to who they admire the most, sports figures rank among the highest. Perhaps young people today are looking at someone like Carson Wentz thinking, "I want what he has found," and will find their way to Christ. And particularly now, when he has suffered a season-ending injury, and he's leaning on his faith to carry him through – perhaps that, too, will draw others to know the Christ he knows.

How about you? In this new year, how can you, how will you help make Jesus known to others?

Finally, we know that one of the things remembered most about the visit of the Magi was that they laid gifts at the foot of the manger for the Christ child – gold, frankincense and myrrh. While we can't do that literally, we sure can do that in other ways – so, as we walk into a new year, I want to invite you to think about the gifts you can give Jesus.

Writer Bob Stuhlmann (*Stories from a Priestly Life*, Epiphany 2015) suggests that we look at each of the gifts that the Magi gave, and think in a new way how we can offer those same things. Gold, he says, symbolizes riches and wealth, so, what will you do this year with the riches God has given you? How will you use them for the sake of the Kingdom of God? How will you use them to help others?

Frankincense symbolized beauty. So how will you, in this new year, make yourself a thing of beauty – inside and out – for God? How will you, how can you, be a blessing to others?

And finally, myrrh – used for burial, reminding us that all of us are mortal, and we know, as the lesson from the Hebrew scriptures this morning reminded us, that “for everything there is a season.” So, in this new year, what will you do with your one precious life? What gift to God can you be with your one precious life?

Friends, we’re just hours away from a new year, a new beginning. We can go on with business as usual, or we can lift up our heads, look for the signs that God will give us, and follow wherever he leads.

Let me close with a quote that I see everyday in my house, because it’s on a very-old cross-stitched sampler I have on the wall. I’m not even sure where it came from, but I’m thinking probably from one of my grandmothers. It’s pretty discolored these days – that’s how old it is. It is actually the last lines of a speech King George VI gave on Christmas Day of 1939 to the people of Great Britain, as they were in the midst of war. The truth of what it said then and what it says now is profound. It goes like this:

“I said to a man who stood at the gate of the year. Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown and he replied, go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than the known way.” (The King’s Message, 25 Dec 1939)

So, friends, go out into the new year, and put your hand into the hand of God. In all ways, may you know Jesus, be known by Him, and make Him known to others. May it be so.

Amen.