FOLLOWING THE LIGHT

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

FOCUS: As those who are people of the Christmas event we are called to ponder the wonder of it all and called to return home by a different way to become different people.

Stars and signs. Do you remember those days, when you could go out at night and marvel at the stars? It seems that our skies have not been free of cloud cover forever doesn’t it? But when it is and when we pay attention, as did the wise man who spoke to us earlier, there is a sense of awe which touches us. Some of you saw the moon, but no stars, for a brief moment as did I as we left the Christmas Eve service. It was peeking through a break in the clouds and seemed a fitting symbol for the night, light shining out of the darkness of clouds.

As the children, and I discussed, the universe is filled with an incalculable number of stars, far more than even the most powerful telescopes can see. The Milky Way, our galaxy, the collection of stars and planets in which we find ourselves is about 100,000 light years in diameter. Its vastness is a source of awe, a reminder of the immenseness of God’s creation.

And 100,000 light years is but the stuff of our immediate neighborhood. In 2012 scientists at the Subaru telescope in Hawaii saw for the first time a galaxy to which they gave the lyrical name SXDF-NB1006-2. It is the furthest galaxy ever seen by human eyes and lies a staggering 12.91 billion light years from earth. That means that the light from that galaxy which those scientists observed that night was actually produced 12.91 billion years ago and took that long to reach those telescopes on Mount Mauna Kea. I cannot even begin to get my mind around that idea. As the Psalmist wrote a long time ago, ***“What are we that God is mindful of us!”***How amazing, how humbling to realize that the God who created all that stuff cares for me and for you and God loves me and loves you more than we can ever fully understand.

As we heard in the video we are not the first people to be in awe of the wonders of the night sky. Those fellows of whom we have read this morning were rather odd ducks, most likely living in what is now Iraq. Their occupation combined astrology, with a bit of medicine and some natural science. Despite what the song says, while certainly imposing characters in their own right, the magi were not kings. Among other things, their primary duty was to scan the night sky and to make note of unusual celestial events. They were then expected to unravel the mysteries the stars foretold.

One night a group of guys gathered to scan the heavens as they had hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times before. It was a clear night and the sky was filled with a magnificent array of sparkling stars and planets, much like the picture on the altar. In those days there was no light pollution, little manmade light to obscure the wonders of the night sky. No matter how many times they looked into the night sky, the awe remained. The vastness, the wonder, of God’s creation was ever captivating, always intriguing. The occasional oil lamps burning deep within the confines of a few modest homes were the only competition the night sky had that night. But even if they had been in Times Square on New Year’s Eve, they would have been able to spot the odd star. It was unlike anything ever before seen or ever seen since. It was brilliant, unnatural and majestic.

We are not told how they knew that it was the star of a new king. It is possible that during the time of the Babylonian captivity word had gotten to the magi that the displaced Jewish faithful were anticipating the future arrival of a messiah, a new king, who would bring peace and justice. Dramatics changes were often associated with unusual celestial activity in that day. Still, I doubt all the group were convinced, there have always been and will always be skeptics. We are not told how many came. We assume there were three because of the three gifts, but we are never given a number. History tells us that magi were usually working together in groups of twelve. However many came, there were surely more stargazers who witnessed the wonder of that night than signed up to follow the light. Still, some felt the calling and the nudging of God and responded. They packed up provisions and gifts fit for a king, loaded their camels and began an adventure which would be like no other, a journey to find the one who would change the course of human history.

It was an epic journey. We are not told the route, but from Babylon to Jerusalem there would have really been only two alternatives. If the wanderers were led as the crow flies they would have crossed the Syrian Desert while traveling more than four hundred miles. If they were guided by the more traditional, well established, trade route theirs would have been a journey of more than a thousand miles. Either way, the path was long and the way difficult. There must have been days when they questioned the wisdom of continuing, times when, as the carol says, they wondered as they wandered. Perhaps some turned back.

Finally, as they approached the sea, the star was no longer in motion. Imagine the relief, the excitement as the men realized that it was holding its position somewhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem. That certainly made sense. Jerusalem was the seat of Jewish power, both political and religious. So the magi marched eagerly toward the royal palace, certain that they would find the child there, anticipating a warm greeting by Herod who they logically assumed must have been the father of the one who would eventually succeed him.

***“Where is he?”*** they asked the servants and staff as they approached the compound, ***“Where is the baby, the one who will become king?”***  Their inquiry elicited strange looks and blank stares. ***“There are no royal babies here, there has been no birth, not even a pregnancy.”*** Word quickly reached Herod that strange men from the east were asking odd questions about some newborn king. Anger welled up in him and fear was etched on his face. He would have certainly been familiar with all of the prophecies. He knew that the troublesome Jewish people were expecting a messiah, a so called King of the Jews. He was threatened and reacted as do most powerful people when threatened, with a vengence.

Struggling to hide his concern Herod called together all the religious leaders, all those who would be familiar with scripture and the prophets words. Once they were gathered Herod told them of the visitors and feigned a desire to join the magi in celebration and in worship of the new messiah. He needed their help, he didn’t know where to look, where to send the visitors from the east. The answer was obvious to those he had gathered. All the religious scholars and leaders knew of Micah’s prophecy that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a small village not far from Jerusalem.

Having the information he needed Herod summoned the magi to his private quarters. As he skillfully picked their brains he determined that the star had first appeared, perhaps signaling the birth, a bit less than two years prior. He then eagerly shared with them the information he had gleaned from the priest and scribes. ***“Prophecy tells us that the messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Go there and look everywhere for he must be there somewhere. And when you find him be sure to come back and get me so I can pay my respects.”***

As the seekers left the palace and walked toward Bethlehem the star began to move again. Soon it led them to the house where they found the baby and Mary. It is interesting to me that the star did not lead them there to begin with. I wonder what happened. Perhaps the magi were so influenced by the preconceived notions of kingship that they failed to pay close enough attention once they found themselves near Jerusalem. Maybe they made assumptions despite what the star was telling them. They would not be the last to have difficulty locating Jesus because of cherished preconceived notions. Later as he sought to share the good news of salvation by grace Jesus was surrounded by those looking for a traditional coronation, by those certain that he had come to overthrow the dreaded Roman government, by those who failed to comprehend the nature of the Godly kingdom which was to be his.

Bethlehem is only about five miles outside Jerusalem. It is certainly possible that the star actually did stop over the house where Jesus was to begin with but that the magi assumed that it was just a bit off the mark. After all in the big scheme of things, after a thousand mile journey, five miles is pretty close to being right on the money. The magi had been led for weeks, months, perhaps even years toward Jerusalem. Most likely the further they went the more convinced they became that the royal city had to be their destination. After all it was a king they sought. Still today there are those who seek him, certain they know where to find him and Know the sort of king he will be. But they are looking in the wrong place for the wrong kind of king.

There is a lesson for us in this part of the story. When it comes to matters of God’s kingdom, we tread dangerous ground when we make assumptions based on what we expect to be God’s plan for us. Time and time again scripture teaches that ours is a God of surprises. God chooses some of the most unlikely folks to be his special servants. God travels some of the most unexpected avenues to bring us his message. Like the magi, many moderns assume the messiah can only be found in the religious equivalent of a royal palace, in a safe and comforting sanctuary, blessing and making life easy for all his subjects. But the truth is that Jesus came as a humble servant, not an arrogant ruler. He came first to the least, the last and the lost, not to the privileged, the proud and the powerful. He spent his days out with the people, not in the temple. The magi sought him in the logical place, in the royal court. But they found him only after following the star more closely. They found him with unremarkable parents, surrounded by things ordinary. And he is still found most often in the least likely places, by regular folks going about their normal routines.

While I have enjoyed watching the night sky and am awed by the vastness of the universe, I have never seen any miraculous stars. I have never felt the urge to pack up my stuff and go off on an undefined journey following the movement of a heavenly body. But the magi did. That made perfect sense to them. You see it was the stars which were most familiar for those guys. Seeing things in the sky was part of what they did for a living. So God choose to lead them with that which was familiar.

I think that is most often the way God works. He deals with us individually and in the manner which is most likely to get through to us. For a brash, passionate young man named Saul, who would have his name changed to Paul, it took a dramatic flash of light, a loud voice and an encounter with blindness. I am more likely to identify with Elijah, It was on the mountain top. He was, hiding in a cave from the king who sought to kill him for chastising the royal court about their idol worship. The one true God spoke to Elijah, not in the ferocious wind which came, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in a still, small but quietly powerful voice. For Mary and Joseph and the shepherds it was in the voices of angels that God’s truth was wrapped.

God’s truth is revealed to different folks in different ways. He comes to us where we are, while we are doing what we always do. He speaks in the manner which best touches our spirits. For some it is in a dream, for others it is with the voice of an angel. Some require something dramatic, others are deeply moved by the still small voice. I don’t know how God is trying to get your attention, but I am convinced that God is. Open your heart, clear your mind, pay attention, and you just might see a bright star leading you to a special place of service in this new year.

Today Christmas is nerly over. Wednesday is Epiphany, a day which calls us to look up and to see the light shining, a day to recognize that the good news of the nativity is also a call to Godly living, a call to reflect the light. The magi followed the star and found the messiah. They were convinced that the babe in that house was the one who had been foretold. They unpacked their camels and offered the ordinary child, found living in a modest home, gifts fit for a king. They were blessed by God and returned home by a different way, as different men, transformed by the grace of God accompanied, in spirit, by a new companion.

Like the magi, Herod was convinced that there was something to the star thing. But to him it was a threat, not a promise. Like the magi, Herod was obsessed with finding the child, but for all the wrong reasons. He sought Jesus in order to get rid of him. While the magi saw in Jesus hope for the world, Herod saw only a threat to the status quo, a challenge to his authority, a competitor, one to be destroyed at all cost.

What a tragedy. There he was at the center of the nativity event. There he was a witness to the greatest miracle of all times. There he was right down the street from the coming of the one who brings great joy, who is the embodiment of God’s amazing grace, who is love incarnate. But because he was so consumed by his love of power, so self-absorbed, so filled with pride, Herod was threatened by the one who seeks in all things not to threaten, but to redeem.

He is born, Christ the Lord. Christmas is nearly over, it is time to leave the holidays behind and to prepare to go home, back to routines, back to the same jobs, back to the same responsibilities But, like those odd guys from the east, we are called to return by a different route, as different people. We are called to follow the light which still shines. For some the truth strikes fear into the heart today just as surely as it did for Herod that first epiphany. The truth still threatens the self-absorbed, the ruthless, the greedy. But all who are willing to follow the light, who answer the call to go home by the better way of service, love and grace, will be set free by the truth and will know hope, joy, peace and love and will pass them on. Howard Thurman, a great African American philosopher and activist of the last century expressed it well in this short poem.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:...
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart. –

For your sake, for the sake of a world looking in all the wrong places and for the sake of the kingdom of the One who came, may we be about the work of Christmas all year long. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.