

Following God's light

Lessons: Matthew 2:1-12

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%20:1-12>

Takeaway1: Following God's light will always set you on a different road than you started out on.

Takeaway2: You will never find Jesus in "Jerusalem".

Christmas is over: tree is down, ornaments put away, after-Christmas sales plundered and Valentine's decorations in waiting boxes. Just two weeks ago, the babe of Bethlehem was born. Across the days and weeks and years, across the miles of tradition and remembrance, a faint light glows. Does it feel distant? From a distance of two weeks, can you still "see" the babe in the manger? Do you remember the moment of the birth of God-in-flesh, God among us?

Every year, we celebrate Christmas and Easter. We do this so that we might remember to see God. Every month – and in most traditions, every week – we consecrate the bread and wine and commit it to our bodies in Holy Communion. We do this so that we might incarnate God in ourselves. Every week, we worship God in community. We do this so that we might live with God as our life's center and our faith community as our own body. And daily we read scripture and pray, so that the word and presence of God become an active part of us, and so that we never, ever lose sight of the Holy One born on Christmas.

On Christmas Eve night, I said in my introduction to worship that on Christmas Eve, we are all seekers. We all come to the manger seeking an experience of the One God. We come to the manger hoping to see God in the face of Christ Jesus. All of us: cynics and seekers and faithful alike. On Christmas Eve, we remember to look for God in Jesus.

But if we want more, if we want to know Jesus and know God, if we crave the constant caress of holiness in our lives, that annual visit to the manger is not enough. That yearly trip to the open tomb at Easter is not enough. Weekly worship and Holy Communion is just a taste of the life we long for. Daily prayer and study just tickle our palates, making us hunger for more.

The story of the Magi is the story of we who, after seeing the baby in the manger, still seek him. The story of the Magi is the story of we who still seek Jesus.

[Are you still searching to really know God in Christ Jesus? Are you looking for him in the right places? Would you know him if you saw him? And if you saw him, and knew him, would you let him change your life?]

The gospel of Matthew says that the Magi saw a star – a light that rose from the horizon. It was a light in the distance – much like that distant glow of Christmas we see now.

Magi observe star at its rising: the light appears in the distance.

- † “Star” might be better thought of as “light”, since it’s clearly a divine light, not a physical one: it rises, stops moving while they’re in Jerusalem, then leads them directly to the right house.

But – Magi go to Jerusalem: they think they are seeking a king, so they begin with the capital city, where the wealth, power, and temple are. If you’re looking for a traditional king, you look to the government, the captains of industry, the rulers and movers and shakers.

- † As the image of the manger fades, we who still seek him need to ask ourselves, “Who is the God I am seeking? Am I looking in the right places for that God?”
 - Characteristics of the God the world needs and wants
 - Camel story
- † Thousands of years of experience tell us that no earthly king, no captain of industry, no president or prime minister or pope can bring to us what we most need: peace, joy, hope. For that, we need a true king, the divine king.

Back in Jerusalem, the Magi ask around about the king who has been born. Scripture tells us that earthly King Herod and all of Jerusalem were worried: a new king, a true king, has been born, and even pagans and gentiles from far away know about it.

- † Herod is frightened, for there can be only one king. When you allow your life to be governed by the divine king, no other king can be in control. To paraphrase the bumper sticker, when Jesus is your commander-in-chief, another pales by comparison.
- † The people of Jerusalem are frightened because a new king, a divine king, cannot help but change things. We resist the divine king, because when the divine king actually enters our lives, when we allow God to take up residence in our hearts and minds and living, our lives must change. The authority of government, captains of industry, movers and shakers and customs of life no longer mean as much. But we are familiar with them, know what to expect from them, know how to succeed with them. We resist the divine king, and are afraid.
 - That’s why we visit the manger, and back away, why we visit the open tomb, and turn our backs. We are afraid of what following God’s light, seeing God’s face, might really mean.

Those who are in power, who benefit from the way things are, will always work to kill off the divine king. They will always try to murder infant faith. So Herod sends the Magi toward Bethlehem, because prophecy suggests the king will be born there.

This time, the Magi actually look to the star, and follow it, which leads them to Bethlehem. They follow God’s light, God’s marker. Actually paying attention, and following the light that God has provided leads them to Jesus.

- † Following the star is different than observing a star, or calculating based on a star.

- † Knowing about God, and loving and following God, are not the same thing. Studying God, learning about God, reading 87 books on the different ways people have described God over the years, learning about other people's ways of God – looking at God from a distance and analyzing God – will never get you to know God. You cannot follow God's light by simply charting where it is. Following means practicing, formation, and study.
- † The Magi's goal, and ours, is to worship, love and follow God, not merely acknowledge God.

They visit the newborn king in a house. It's not a castle, it's not even the Holy Family's "normal" house: they have left Nazareth for Bethlehem because of the census. Wherever they are staying, it's not home.

- ... Jesus was homeless from the beginning. But by practice and by following God's light, he found his home the temple, in God, and in his community of disciples and friends.
- ... Jesus was displaced by the king's census, was taken out of the norm. If you're looking for Jesus in the seats of power, you're looking in the wrong place. Look in the broken places, the out of norm places.

[He was displaced by the earthly king, by the worldly order. How do we displace God?]

Magi have brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh: great gifts for a king or a high priest; not so useful for a baby boy away from home.

- ... Three wise women joke – what you're looking for determines where you look and what you bring with you.
- ... What you bring to the divine King tells you what kind of King you're expecting. Do you bring your grief and your pain? Then you're expecting a healer. Do you bring your anger and your despair? Then you're expecting a peacemaker. Do you bring your daily decisions, your hopes and dreams? Then you're expecting a king with power and a plan. What do you bring to Jesus, and what else might you bring if you trusted that Jesus is all he's reputed to be?

When the Magi see the child, when they kneel down and worship Jesus, God transforms them.

- † They have been looking to the configurations of stars for their salvation and their life, when they should have been looking to the child.
- † These Magi, who carry with them great treasures to give an earthly king, kneel before a baby in a home in a backwater town in occupied Israel. They kneel before the true, the divine king. And they are changed.
- † When we have an actual encounter with God-in-Christ, we are transformed. We are transformed by the king we have been seeking. So if we are looking for healing, we find healing; for peacemaking, peace; for guidance, we find a plan and power to bring it

about. What do you really need from the divine king? Are you seeking it, and bringing that need to Jesus?

- † The truth is that actual encounters with God-in-Christ are usually small moments. Christmas and Easter are nice, but they're not only or usual actual encounter with Jesus. When we really experience the love and glory of Jesus, it's usually brief. The details often are quickly forgotten. So it is critical that we allow for many possibilities of seeing the light of Christ. If we are to follow the light, we have to be looking for it. We have to practice, practice.
- † The other truth is this: If the Magi had remained in their own country, or had stayed in Jerusalem, they would have known Herod and the priests – the power and captains of industry, the movers and shakers – but they never would have experienced Christ, no matter how wonderful it was, or how many kings and powers they did meet.

They, and we, have to leave Jerusalem – we have to leave the obvious order of things – in order to know Jesus. And we have to look for him in the places he is, given the kind of God he is.

Magi have a dream not to return to Herod, and are led back to their own country by another road.

- ... Our God is constantly active and at work: God guides them away from the seat of power.
- ... They cannot return to Jerusalem – their old way of looking for the King.
- † Their paths are changed. They may return home, but they are not, and cannot be, the same people. After kneeling down and really seeing the divine King, they cannot be on the same road they were on.
- † Transformation sets you on another road. What does the Epiphany road look like for you? (This is the interactive piece.)
 - Where did you start?
 - Where are you now?
 - Do you long for healing, for peace, for a plan and the power to fulfill it? Who is the God you are seeking?
 - Are you looking for God to transform *those places*? Are you looking for God in the right places for the transformation to happen?

Open up the bulletin insert and take a minute to ask yourself: Now that Christmas is over, do I still want to follow the light wherever it leads? Do I still seek Jesus? And what do I need to do to find him?

Lessons: Matthew 2:1-12

Our scripture reading today is from the first book of New Testament, known as the gospel of Matthew. Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 2; we'll read verses 1 through 12.

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." When King Herod heard this, **he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him**; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "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."

Then Herod **secretly** called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he set 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."

When they had heard the king, they set out; 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.

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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, **they left for their own country by another road.**