

Reading from the Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12
The Star of Grace
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Sunday, Jan. 2, 2011

*We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain
Following yonder star*

If you couldn't land the role of Joseph or one of the Shepherds ... being picked to play one of the three kings was a nice consolation prize when it came to church Christmas pageants.

I mean, Joseph just stands there with a grim look on his face ... the shepherds don't get to speak any lines ... but a magi ... well, you get to look regal with a really cool costume and you get to hold one of those neat gift boxes that you lay in front of an American Girl doll dressed as Jesus in the manger.

So what if the script combined all the best elements of all the Gospels and merged them into one cohesive script ... it was a traditional telling of the story and everyone loved to see their child moving through that story ... even when the production, like the tradition we have adopted, is filled with mistakes and miscues that were remember with laughter through the years.

But ... if you stop and pay attention to the Biblical story of the magi ... and to the words of the hymn, *We Three Kings of Orient Are* ... there is an ominous warning tucked within the fourth verse ... as the one magi leaves a gift of myrrh ... "Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom ... Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying ... sealed in the stone-cold tomb." A foretelling of what is to come.

But there was something very powerful that called out to those magi ... because they came seeking something ... a messiah was born ... a king ... unlike any king before or since. And just like them ... maybe you've come here this morning seeking something. What is it that calls you here. . . what are you looking for?

Listen with your heart to the words of a very familiar story ... from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-12. I will be reading from *The Messenger*. Out of respect for the word of the Lord, those who are able, please stand for the reading of the Gospel.

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory - this was during Herod's kingship – a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East.

2 They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

3 When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified - and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well.

4 Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

5 They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

6 It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land, no longer bringing up the rear. From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."

7 Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared.

8 Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

9 Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child.

10 They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

11 They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

12 In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

What do you think they were looking for ... those magi from the East? Their curiosity certainly piqued when they saw a very unusual star rising. But why would a star rising in the far off sky toward Jerusalem cause them to take a journey that could be well over a thousand miles. You see ... between them and Jerusalem stretched the great Arabian Desert ... and beyond that was Babylon, the place of exile ... and the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers ... which flowed past the ancient home of Abraham ... watering the land of Eden.

Why would these magi ... or astrologers ... or royalty ... whoever they were ... risk such a long and dangerous journey ... what do you think they were looking for? The scriptures tell us that they were looking for the newborn king of the Jews ... the Messiah. Yet, why would they ... why would people from the East ... being the most Gentile of the Gentiles ... even be interested in the Jewish Messiah? How would they even have knowledge of the Jewish longing for the Messiah?

Well ... maybe they had copies of the Torah left behind when the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon centuries before ... maybe even a remnant of Jews who did not return to their homeland, but who still held to their beliefs, shared their knowledge with them. Who knows? But underneath all the historical speculation ... you don't suppose God had a hand in their journey, do you? I don't know.

After all, God's not even mentioned in our reading. It's all about magi ... and a frightened king ... and Sadducees studying the ancient scriptures. And yet ... these magi come anyway ... they're persistent and focused ... and in the end ... they stop at the house of a little child ... his name is Jesus ... he's just a toddler ... living in a poor house of a peasant carpenter ... he certainly doesn't look anything like a king ... certainly not someone worthy of a 1000 plus mile trip through the mountains and the desert.

And yet ... they kneel ... and they worship him ... and they present him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These Gentiles honor and worship the King of the Jews ... the Messiah. What do you make of that?

I'll tell you what I make of it. God's grace. Pure and simple. God's grace. The birth of Jesus Christ might have gone unnoticed by most of the world on that starry night long ago ... but the event literally tore the foundations of the world apart ... and nothing ... absolutely nothing ... has been the same again ... absolutely nothing. God's grace broke into the world and nothing was going to stop it from spreading beyond the hills of Bethlehem and pouring across international borders ... breaking down walls of hostility and hate ... spreading across the land like a sweet epidemic of love and compassion and hope unlike anything ever experienced before ... God's grace even made it to the home of some magi living in a far off land ... and that grace continues to spread into our world today ... into places where we've lost all hope ... where we are afraid ... where we are lonely, forgotten or terrorized with fear ... there is absolutely nothing that can stand in the way of God's grace in this world ...

Scott Hoezee puts it this way: "What Matthew may be trying to convey...is the reach of grace. Matthew is giving a Gospel sneak preview: the Christ child who attracted these odd Magi to his cradle will later have the same magnetic effect on Samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors on the take, despised Roman soldiers, and ostracized lepers" (*The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts : The Third Readings, The Gospels*, page 7).

I'll take that a step further ... the Christ child who attracted these odd Magi to his cradle will later have the same magnetic effect on this 56-year-old pastor ... and will later have the same magnetic effect on you and you and you ... and everyone sitting in this sanctuary. You might believe that you drove yourself to church this morning ... but it was grace that really got you here.

I have no idea what happened to those magi after they left Jesus that day. But I have no doubt that their lives were forever changed in a most powerful way that only God's grace can do. They weren't expecting it ... it was just an epiphany ... God's grace ... suddenly filling their lives. Because that's precisely what God's grace does ... it changes you ... it changes you into the image of the one who created you.

Our journey as disciples of Christ is often long and difficult. We face all kinds of challenges along the way. I sure do ... because I can be quite stubborn ... Ask Susan ... she'll tell you. I like to pick my own roads to travel ... I like to figure it all out for myself ... that's when I usually get stuck along the way. That's when I have to let go and trust God ... I have to stop and look for that star rising on the horizon ... and begin my journey again with the grace of God.

You probably get stuck too, once in a while. You might even feel like you're blindly crossing a vast desert wilderness and you've lost your way ... we all do. You might be struggling as you try to change something about your life, but the fear of making that kind of change just scares you to death ... you might be tired of being depressed ... or feeling guilty about something ... maybe your life has become such a burden and you've lost the joy you once had ...

Then stop ... look eastward for the light of God ... don't go it alone anymore. All around you is God's grace ... God's grace in this community of faith ... people who will walk with you and support you and guide you ... until you find yourself in the glow of God's perfect light. Reach out for God's grace.

On the other hand, you might be one of those who is looking with excited anticipation at this new year ... maybe you're expecting big changes in your life ... the anticipated birth of a child ... a new job ... a marriage. Who knows what else?

If that is so ... then your journey is filled with all sorts of possibilities and hope. Keep your eye on the horizon and follow the light of Christ ... remember it is God's grace that has brought you on this journey.

And just maybe ... something is tugging at your life ... and you've begun spiritual journey ... hoping like the Magi ... to meet the Messiah for the first time. God's light has touched your life ... and I and many others here ... would love to join you and share with you how power of God's love and grace can change your life.

I don't know where the grace of God is leading you ... but I do know that whatever it is that you seek ... wherever it is that you are being led to ... the light of Jesus Christ will show you the way.

The light ... the gospel of Jesus Christ ... God's grace ... will confront you with the truth about your life ... it will change you and mold you into something new and wonderful ... showing you the way to the life God has always wanted you to have.

Let us pray:

O Star of wonder, star of night

Star with royal beauty bright

Westward leading, still proceeding

Guide us to thy Perfect Light

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