

*Follow That Star*

*Shepherd's Grace Church*

*January 6, 2013*

**Matthew 2:1-12**

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>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." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'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.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent 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."

<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Also read Isaiah 60: 1-6)

Arise and Shine! Your light has come to you and it will cover you and you will rejoice in it! These are the words of the prophet Isaiah spoken over 500 years before the birth of Jesus. This whole passage is like a birth announcement! Nations shall come to you and the abundance of the seas shall be yours. You will receive gifts from strangers and you will rejoice for these strangers will proclaim the glory of the Lord! What a beautiful expression of what the Lord intends to give. Gifts of gold, frankincense will mark the fulfillment of God's promise! What a beautiful announcement!

I am wondering this morning if any of us has taken the time to go back and read the birth announcements of our own children. If we did, would we find words like rejoice, lift up your arms, experience the abundance? Would there be expressions of great joy and promise? Perhaps many of us have these announcements tucked away in childhood scrap books. We look at them and regardless of the words, I am sure the sight of the announcement allows us to remember, to experience again the birth of our child. In our eagerness to remember, perhaps we recall the event itself. For me, it seems like it was only yesterday!

Today, I wonder what God thinks as God looks at this birth announcement for His Son. Does God experience the same kinds of emotions and anticipations we do? Does God look forward to the unfolding events of Jesus' life as we do the lives of our children? Beyond that wonder however is a sense of amazement...amazement that the announcement was written over 500 years before the birth of Jesus! My amazement stems not from what God knew at the time He revealed these words to the prophet Isaiah, God is omniscient. God knows all in all! My amazement stems more from my own realization that God chose to wait so long before bringing about such a miraculous occurrence.

God chose to wait for the fullness of time to reveal His plan for salvation for the world! He chose to wait until exactly the right moment to make His plan known. God waited through the days of Isaiah and through the years of silence when the Greeks and Romans occupied the land God promised to God's chosen people. God waited until the Sadducees and Pharisees formed factions in their interpretation of the law as it had been handed down by Moses. God waited until all the circumstances necessary for a complete understanding of what was happening could be observed and noticed in a world that was broken and beaten and badly in need of redemption! This amazement at the announcement of Jesus birth is exactly where the Gospel message from Matthew intersects with the birth announcement from the prophet Isaiah!

Perhaps some of you are familiar with a new stream of social media called twitter. Twitter appears to be an evolution of text messaging and facebook communication. Twitter is tied to e-mail, facebook, and text and allows people to follow one another during the course of their daily activities. Twitter invites those of us who want to know an opportunity to be fully informed regarding the mundane activities of another person's life. The interest here seems to stem largely from the willingness of famous persons to share these mundane details of their lives with those who want to know what the rich and famous might be up to.

It seems that not to long ago, God was interested in what we were up to. Apparently not being acquainted with twitter or facebook, God used a low tech method of determining what we were up to. God sent an angel to see about the state of the world. The angel came down, looked around, learned about the activities of the world and went back up to report to God. The angel's report was that 95% of the people in the world were not doing good, or even seeking good. God was very seriously distressed at the report filed by the angel so God sent another angel to re-investigate. The second angel came back with the same conclusion.

During the investigation, the angel apparently learned of twitter and facebook and e-mail. As a result of this new knowledge, God sent a tweet to the 5% who were doing good in the world. The tweet was tied to all their facebook instant messages and to all existing e-mail accounts. Everyone who was doing good would have had a chance to receive God's communication and be encouraged! I am wondering...did any of you receive the notice of encouragement? Me neither!! Woops!

Well, since none of us received that communication, perhaps we can take our encouragement from the message written by Matthew and from the prophet Isaiah. The message we read, or hear today can be summed up in the form of this tweet: *#Follow That Star!* Tweets can only be 140 characters long. As we read the total passage today, we can effectively reduce our statement of faith to the tweet God wants to send.

Matthew starts out revealing that the events he describes take place in the days of King Herod. This starting place is significant because it reminds us that God's chosen people are no longer living freely in the land God had promised them. First the Greeks and then the Romans occupied this land and the Romans continue to occupy it placing a puppet on the throne of the kingdom promised to the descendants of King David! All is not right with Israel. Its government does not have the best interest of its people at heart. Today, many of us can relate to the pressure that places on a person's daily life. We feel that we must act as individuals and that we must always look out for ourselves instead of having the confidence to look out for one another.

The second event Herod's rule brings to our mind is that it is not lawful. Herod's reign is illegitimate and should not exist. We know this because of God's promises to King David. Herod knows this as well as is evidenced by his statement when the wise men appear. Immediately Herod is afraid! Immediately Herod summons the chief priests and scribes and inquires regarding the birth of the One whom he knows is the rightful heir to the throne of Israel! Herod's actions are an admission that he is not a legitimate authority. His actions are an admission that the world, the ruling world is not in concert with the ultimate authority of God!

Herod is afraid because he might be found out. He might be proven a fraud. He might lose the power he has become so comfortable with! In so many ways, Herod typifies those in power in our world, in our country, in our state and our community today. Some who have been chosen to lead have become corrupted by the power the world gives them. As a result, they lose interest in the people they are elected or appointed to protect and serve and seek only their own interests. Not all who are in positions of leadership exhibit this flaw, but all are tempted by the power available to them. Those who succumb to such temptation recognize their error, but they come to enjoy the admiration and respect given them to such a great degree that they cannot escape the allure of their position! They live in constant fear that someone will shine a light on them that will reveal their weakness and their wrongness.

It is that fear which motivates King Herod. My observation of this fear reveals three issues we should be aware of as we contemplate God's power in our lives:

1. Fear produces unusual action. In Herod's case, when he learned of the birth of a new King, he summoned the chief priests and scribes. Herod, a Roman puppet would have had little use for these people in ordinary circumstances, but because of what he knew regarding the rightful heir

to the kingdom, Herod consulted with a people for whom he would ordinarily have any respect. Herod would have been much more comfortable seeking the advice of Roman gods than the advice of priests and scribes of a land which could not sustain itself in the face of Roman tyranny.

2. Fear produces unusual alliance. Not only does Herod ally himself with the unlikely forces of the priests and scribes, but also with the foreign forces of wise men. Herod attempts to bond with them by the trading of information. He meets with them secretly, not including the priests or scribes, not including members of his own government, but seeking to protect only his own power! Herod ceases to care, even about those who support and care for him and is willing to sacrifice their positions in order to protect his own! Alliances with the wise men would have been deadly to Herod if they were discovered by his Roman superiors. His risk was great but his fear was greater!
3. Fear produces unusual activity. Herod invites the wise men to go and search and find the Messiah who is born in Bethlehem and to bring word back to him. Instead of sending an army which would have been at his disposal, Herod sends people whom he has just met, trusting them, because he knows he cannot trust others. Fear is such a powerful motivator that it overrides all rational thought processes. Fear forces people to live in the world always looking over their shoulder, always wondering when they will be found out, always dreading the next issue that will come into their lives because they know they will have to invent new lies to cope with it.

When I was working for JCPenney, one of my job assignments from the personnel department was to travel with regional security to interview and report back regarding suspicious management activities. Once, an auditor went into a store and found several curious entries by the store manager. After investigating, the auditor found that the manager had been padding his own expense account and had in fact stolen several thousand dollars over the course of many years.

In my role, generally store managers liked to see me. When I came to visit them, it was often to interview them for potential promotions. When I walked into the store they were on their best behavior. On the day I walked into this store, the store manager looked up from his desk and smiled broadly at my appearance. He was genuinely glad to see me. I was, however, immediately followed by the head of security for the region. When the store manager saw Bill True, his face fell. His body language changed. He became defensive and evasive. He was afraid.

The result of our interview with the store manager was that he was terminated from employment. I knew when I went into his office that this would be the result. The store manager tried to justify his actions (unusual action) tried to negotiate to remain employed (unusual alliance) and tried to make excuses for what had been done (unusual activity). He was frightened and he was willing to sacrifice even his own integrity to maintain his power.

After the decision had been made and the initial shock had worn off, I had an opportunity to talk to the person. The store manager had talked with his family, described honestly what had happened and recognized the difficulty of the days that lay ahead of them. He told me candidly that he was ultimately glad he had been caught. He said the fear of being caught was something that had eaten at him daily. He never knew when he was going to have to tell another lie, or cover up another inconsistency!

I can imagine that is the same kind of consuming fear Herod lived in. His actions consistently point to the necessity for making decisions that preserved and perpetuated his own power. When he heard there was an investigation of his power, a challenge to his authority, he was immediately afraid that he would be found out! God does not want us to live in this kind of fear! God wants us to walk in the light!

It is that light that Isaiah speaks of today when he invites us to arise and shine! The world has lived in darkness and oppression for too long! Now is the time for light to come into the world! Today, in fulfillment of the birth announcement given 500 years ago, God makes this light known to all the world! God does not use priests or scribes. God uses people outside of His chosen so that the world might know that the light comes for all the world to see! The light comes so that all the world may know!

The light that comes from this star Matthew speaks of also reveals three things to us:

1. Light reveals sight. The wise men come to Jerusalem because of a vision that they have seen. Light guides them to a place which God wants to make known to them! Sight allows us to look around and recognize what is going on in the world. God continues to make Himself known to the world. He is available to be seen if we are willing to look. Matthew says in chapter 6 and 7, look, knock and seek. These activities are as a result of the light that has come into the world at Christmas. This is Epiphany! As John says in chapter 1, the light has come into the world and darkness cannot overcome it. Today Matthew invites us to see.
2. Light also provides safety. When we walk in light, we do not stumble into darkness of temptation or fear. The wisemen could have easily been tempted to return and would have no doubt been rewarded greatly by Herod for their information. Instead, they took comfort from the assurance of God that they would be protected as they traveled to a place to which God alone was calling them. After they talked to the king, they left and there, just ahead of them was the light they had observed at its rising. That light was their assurance, their safety in a difficult and strange place. Many of us find ourselves, often in these strange and uncertain places. God invites us to seek the light of his Word and in that light we will find the safe and certain place of our salvation and redemption!
3. Finally, light provides support. Have you ever had to get up in the middle of the night. Darkness evokes fear and shadows. We tend to jump at every turn, at every creak or tiny noise. In the daylight these noises often go unnoticed, but not in the darkness! Light offers us support in our investigation. When it is shined, the tiny noises and creaks become insignificant.

When I talked to the store manager who had had the light of investigation shone on his life, he found a treasure he had forgotten. He discovered the strength of family and the internal will to pursue that which is right in his life! Light offers us the opportunity to experience this kind of support. God wants us to know it is there. Arise, shine, for the light has come to YOU!

You are the light! We are the light, because the light has come into us. This is what we celebrate at Christmas! This is what we recognize as we associate with the wisemen. We are the seekers! We are the ones who have traveled great distances in our lives and we are the ones to whom the light

How does this happen? Is there a star outside that we have not noticed? Can we go outside now and see it if we look? Is there a celestial body which brings us confidence and carries our devotion? From the times that Matthew's Gospel was first studied, people have tried to make this case. Copernicus and Gallileo have investigated to make a case for a heavenly body appearing at the time of the birth of Jesus. Their and other efforts have been largely unconvincing. While there may have been an actual body of light, there is just simply not enough factual evidence for us to claim it absolutely.

Instead of looking for this kind of light, I offer another source. I offer God himself as the source of the light. In Exodus, God goes ahead of the Israelites as a pillar of light (fire—same word in Hebrew), God portrays himself in Isaiah as a Light to the Nations, In the passage we read today from Isaiah, we find that "our light has come!" This light is none other than God in Jesus Christ! Jesus describes himself as the Light of the World! It is this light that is made known to the wisemen who witness the opening of the heavens and the inbreaking of a light which the darkness cannot overcome.

This light is not visible in the presence of fear and evil. It is not visible in the presence of Herod and the priests who will attempt to form an unholy alliance to destroy the light. They will be unsuccessful in this attempt, the child and his parents will escape to Egypt, but at a later time, fear and evil will raise their ugly head again and another attempt will be made.

The light is available to those who will use the information God has provided to seek after Him and He will be found. The wisemen continue their journey, knowing that God will guide them. They know God has given a promise to a people and they believe that promise. As a result they *Follow That Star!*"

What star lights your way today? Are you getting tweets from the superstar athletes? From movie stars? From worldly idols? Or, are you instead seeking after the one whom the scriptures pointed to more than 500 years before His birth. Jesus invites you today to let the light of his star burn brightly for you all year long. Next week, the Christmas decorations will all be taken down around

the church. There will be no wreaths of Peace, Hope, Love and Joy. The advent candles will be put away and the light of the star will be once again removed from center stage in our sanctuary.

God does not want this light to go out however. He therefore invites you to let it blaze brightly in your hearts! In those moments when fear invites you to make unusual decisions remember the tweet God sends out! #Follow That Star! Let the Lord of light guide your life and let your life guide others to Him!

Amen!

**Next Week: Scripture: Luke 3: 15-22. Message: *A Whisper Heard Round the World!*** This week we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus! We remember the water, we remember the act. It is one we have experienced. Do we remember the words God spoke? As God's children, do we feel the power of the Holy Spirit? Do we remember the call to serve? How can we respond? Come and worship! Come and see!