



*Wishing On A Star*

## “Wishing on a Star”

Epiphany of Our Lord  
Saturday and Sunday, January 6 and 7, 2018  
All Services  
Sister Marianne Brock  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

You may or may not know that Pastor John Brock and I have what some might consider an unusually strong affinity for Walt Disney, the man, and Walt Disney World, the resort, so when I was sent the theme chosen for this week's sermon, I had to blink back the Pixie Dust in my eyes. I even watched Pinocchio, from which we get the song “When You Wish Upon A Star. It was darker than I remembered, with lots of drinking and smoking and liberal use of the word “stupid.” I'm not sure it's entirely appropriate for today's young children ... and it certainly wasn't helpful in my sermon preparation.

But on Monday evening, around 6:30, John and I were in our kitchen preparing our traditional New Year's Day meal... and by “preparing,” I mean we were studying the Chinese take-out menu. Our dogs alerted us to something incredibly alarming: there was someone at our front door, and it was probably bad guys! (Our dogs are very concerned about bad guys.)

No one uses our front door, not even us, but sure enough, there was a gentleman standing on our porch, and he was knocking on our door. He didn't *look* like a bad guy, so I pulled the dog beds away from the door and unlocked it with the ancient skeleton key that came with it when it was installed 80 years ago. I stepped out into the windy darkness, with John following me, and the dogs clamoring to do the same, and I greeted the stranger with a hearty and welcoming “HELLO!”

The man held out his hand and said, “My name's Lee Brown and I'm new to the area. I've seen your star and I've stopped to ask about it.”

(Very quietly, in my own head, I thought: Oh, how timely! I've been looking for a sermon illustration...)

The star to which he was referring is a large, lighted, multi-point plastic Moravian star hanging from our front porch roof. It was a gift from John's parents, and we've had it nearly as long as we've been married.

Lee told us, “We just moved here from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where there is a large Moravian population. These stars are everywhere... I thought perhaps you might be Moravian...”

(Spoiler alert #1: we're not Moravian)

However, the star on our porch came from Winston-Salem – because John's father was from that area - and we talked about that for a bit. Pretty soon I decided that our visitor was probably NOT a bad guy, and I invited Lee to step inside, where it wasn't quite so windy and cold.

It turns out that Lee was looking for a Moravian congregation – he was looking for his people. He had seen our star, and he read it as a sign that we might be his people...

The fact that he saw the star and acted on it, taking the bold step of knocking on the door of complete strangers, on a dark and windy night, in hopes of finding his people made me feel all the more apologetic when I had to admit to him that we are NOT Moravian... we just like their stars.

However, as ELCA Lutherans, we ARE in full-communication with the Moravian Church. As denominations of Christianity, we agree on more than we disagree, especially on big ideas, like our understanding of the sacraments. And, as I pointed out to Lee, we have lots of common heritage. In fact, you visit an old Lutheran cemetery and a Moravian cemetery (which they charmingly refer to as "God's Acre), you're going to see a lot of common names. The German Lutherans and the Moravians are cousins!

We talked just a bit longer and exchanged business cards. True to our Lutheran heritage, John and I COMPLETELY neglected to invite Lee to worship with us here at Trinity. I did, however, offer him a fistful of Swedish Christmas cookies.

As Lee went out the front door, we thanked him for stopping. He got into his car and left, and John and I went back to pondering deep spiritual things, like whether we wanted to order eggrolls, or dumplings, or both.

It wasn't until much later that evening that it occurred to me that this visit from a stranger might have had a deeper meaning... and that we may have missed it.

I've never thought of our Moravian star as anything but a decoration. I mean, I keep it lit throughout Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany as a sign of hope and the light of Christ ... and as a porch light, but it never occurred to me that someone would see it and make assumptions – even correct ones – about the faith lives of me and my family.

But Lee was *looking* for signs... he's a stranger in these parts, and he's looking for a worshipping community. He read our porch light as sign of familiarity...of welcome... of home... and I hope that he found a bit of that in our house even if we didn't remember to invite him to worship.

Today, we hear the story of the magi, or, as this translation calls them, "the wise men," men of ancient time who were also looking for signs. We had a young boy in a former congregation who thought the pastor called them "the mad guys," and a certain wolf has never been able to shake that idea.

You might think of them as the three kings, and you might even know them by name: Casper, Melchior, and Balthazar.

They're probably the characters in the Christmas story about whom we have imagined the most detail, very little of which comes from scripture. What we think we know about them is largely a bunch of stuff from legend and song that we have internalized so deeply that we collectively assume that the Bible tells us so.

But today's gospel is the ONLY place the magi are specifically mentioned, and nowhere does Matthew say that there are only three of them.

Nowhere does Matthew say that they are kings.

Nowhere does Matthew call them by name.

Matthew doesn't even say that they have a camel, but there's a camel in nearly every nativity scene, and there's a camel on the bulletin cover, so it *must* be scriptural!

(Spoiler alert #2: there's no camel in this gospel)

But what we do know about the magi is that they were wise – scientists, even. They studied nature and the cosmos.

They were, as one might say, “not from around here.” They were from the east - not like New Jersey, but from the place where the light comes from.

And we know that they were men of faith – because they were seeking the child born King of the Jews for the express purpose of paying him homage – they wanted to worship him.

We know that they brought fancy, expensive gifts (you know what they are – say it with me: GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH).

We know that they were overwhelmed with joy and bowed before Mary and the Christ-child.

And we know that they paid attention to their dreams, and took a different route home accordingly.

In the larger narrative of God revealing himself in Christ Jesus, the magi are among the first witnesses. They are outsiders who pay attention and follow divine instructions to seek out the child born King of the Jews – and they do so, not for their own gain, but for the opportunity to bow and worship him.

As foreigners in the land of Judah, the magi serve as the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah, who foretells that ALL NATIONS will bow before the Lord: not just God's Chosen People... ALL NATIONS. Salvation is for all.

Isaiah also mentions camels, so maybe THAT'S where camels in the nativity scenes come from...

The magi are unlikely recipients of God's message of hope and redemption, just like Mary – who is young and poor and female- and the shepherds – who are dirty and stinky and unwelcome in polite society,

If I were God, I think I would want to share that message with a better class of people... people who look like me and worship like me, people who are respected and respectable, and people who don't smell like sheep. I certainly wouldn't want to share the message with the kind of people who look to the stars for answers or trust their dreams over MapQuest.

But I'm not God... and we can all be grateful for that.

God's actions are as surprising and audacious in this story as they are in every other story of God's grace and mercy being revealed and poured out onto those we might feel are undeserving – the poor and outcast, the blind and lame; tax collectors, prostitutes, and thieves; those afflicted with demons of all sorts; those who don't proclaim Christ as their Lord and Savior, and those who call God by another name.

Because Jesus was FIRST revealed to the outsiders, and it was the outsiders who recognized him and paid him homage. It was the outsiders who knelt and worshipped him, while the rich and powerful were threatened and rejected Jesus and sought to bring about his death.

(Spoiler alert #3: Jesus doesn't stay dead)

Today, the story of the magi reminds us that God is and has *always been* revealed through Jesus Christ to people outside of polite society and the acceptable religious community – and that, when we are unified through Christ, we lose all distinction of insiders and outsiders, men and women, tribe and language and race, and all the other reasons we find to separate ourselves ... as foretold by the prophets

Today's message of the magi is not the story of starry-eyed, plastic nativity figures casting their wishes into the night sky. It's the story of a God whose love, grace, and mercy reaches to all people and all corners of creation. It's the story of a God who sends messages in prophecy, dreams, and wonderful signs... and of those who are open to seeing and hearing the message. It is the story of light – a star shining brightly in a cold, dark world – and that light is Christ, audaciously and mysteriously breaking in to our human lives bringing hope and peace for all the world.

“We have seen his star and have come to worship him.”

Amen

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