



## “Starbright”

Epiphany of Our Lord  
Saturday and Sunday, January 5-6, 2019  
All Services  
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner, Jr.  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14;  
Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Grace and peace be to you from our  
Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus  
Christ. Amen.

When my wife Linda and I were living in Bedford Hills, New York, a California man with his rental car was smashed by a Metro North Train in Bedford Hills. Now he was out of the car and everything was okay. His intention was to merge onto the Saw Mill River Parkway which parallels the railroad tracks, and as he was about to do that go on the on ramp his GPS said, “turn right” and so he did, right onto the railroad tracks and his car got stuck.

Now before GPS and Satellite navigation people navigated by the stars by following the constellations. Matter of fact, the earliest notice that we have of that is actually from *Homer’s Odyssey* which tells the story of the city of Troy, and that was written around 1200 BC.

Two years ago, the United States Naval Academy brought back a course on celestial navigation after not teaching it for over a decade. It seems they also felt that perhaps the cadets were relying a little too heavily on the GPS, just like the guy who ended up on the railroad tracks.

Today we celebrate the Festival of Epiphany. It also has something to do with navigation, the three kings following the star to the baby Jesus. But it is also an opportunity for you and for me, especially as we go into a new year to check the direction of our own lives and our own spiritual condition. Are we going on the right course? Who is guiding it? Who is in control of your life? Are you leading your own way? Are you giving space to God to lead you?

Christian author Dallas Willard was serving as an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California, when the students discovered that he was a Christian they wanted to ask him “Why” he was a Christian. Many of them came from non-church backgrounds. So, when they asked him “Why,” he responded, “Well being a Christian is being a disciple of Jesus, being someone who follows Jesus.” Again, the students asked him, “Why would you want to do that.” Willard asked them back, “Well who better to follow? You got somebody better in mind?”

If you think about your life, over the course of your life you will follow someone. When you're young you follow your parents, maybe your grandparents. When you get a little older in your teenage years you might follow your friends, much to your detriment sometimes, or as you get a little older you might follow mentors or teachers, perhaps business or political leaders. But the fact is everyone in life has to follow someone. And maybe the lesson of Epiphany is that you and I as Christians should be mindful of "who" or "what" we follow.

Matthew's gospel is very instructive here. We hear the story of the wise men who are coming from the East to come to Jerusalem, asking the question, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

Now these wise men were from the East, they were probably from modern day Iran or Persia, they were astrologers, they were interpreters of the stars and the heavenly movements. They go to Jerusalem because the stars telling them a king has been born, and of course they go to the palace of the king. Looking for this new born king though, they are told by the scribes and the priests that the more appropriate place would be to go to Bethlehem.

Now to the Israelites these wise men were considered idolaters, they are people who followed after false gods. They trusted their own calculations of the stars to give meaning to their life rather than giving that to God. And the star that they followed was the Magi's idol. So, from a religious standpoint they don't belong in Bethlehem seeking the Jewish Messiah. Matter of fact, they don't deserve to be at Jesus' birthday party at all. But that is exactly where Matthew the Evangelist places them. He is delighted to see these three wise men there. The birth of the Jewish Messiah is going to be for the world, not just for the Jewish nation.

But with so many stars, how do you decide which one to follow? Well you know by looking at the destination to which it leads. And Matthew it is very clear about this. The star of the magi, of the three kings, leads to Jesus and they will worship him as King, Priest, and Savior.

The star is an announcement, it's a sign. It points to something more significant. The revelation of the sign from God is not the star, but it is Jesus himself. Again, Matthew makes this clear, the star stopped over the place where the child was. The point is, the child, the rising star leads to Jesus and in finding Jesus the three kings are "overwhelmed with joy." Now the message translation puts it this way, "the three kings could hardly contain themselves." I like that.

Over the holidays, Linda and I decided to watch a movie that we got from Netflix, it was called "*I Can Only Imagine*." It's the story of the Christian Band lead singer Bart Millard from *Mercy Me*, his relationship with his abusive father in Texas. As his father gets close to the end of his life, he has a change of heart and becomes a follower of Jesus, in many ways because of his son's singing. He receives grace and mercy and forgiveness from God, but it's hard for his son who's the Christian singer to forgive this father that had abused him for so many years. Finally, his father is diagnosed with cancer and he ends up dying, but during that period his son came back to care for him

in those last weeks of his life, and he found a new-found relationship with his father that he had never had before.

In reflecting on how God's mercy had acted on his life and on his father's life, he wrote the lyrics to a song that was very famous called "*I Can Only Imagine.*" The chorus of the song goes like this. . . *Surrounded by Your glory*

*What will my heart feel?*

*Will I dance for you Jesus?*

*Or in awe of You be still?*

*Will I stand in Your presence?*

*Or to my knees will I fall?*

*Will I sing Hallelujah?*

*Will I be able to speak at all?*

*I can only imagine, I can only imagine.*

People respond differently to the signs that we receive from God. Some people respond positively. Their life has changed, and they can become in the words of Matthew, overwhelmed by joy. We see that in Mary, Jesus' mother. We see that in the shepherds when they hear the announcement from the angels and they rush down to Bethlehem to see the new born king. And we see it in the life of the three wise men who are coming to see Jesus.

But some people act negatively to the sign from God. We see that in King Herod who is overwhelmed with jealousy and who's power hungry and a little bit later in Matthew's gospel sends his soldiers into Bethlehem to kill all of the children under the age of two.

But some people, they respond by doing nothing and that is the saddest of all. For Matthew's gospel, it's the priests and the scribes. These religious people, they knew all about the sign. They knew what it meant. They had read the prophets, they had identified the place where the Messiah was to come. They knew the significance and even the significance of the visit by the wise men, and they didn't do anything. They didn't move a muscle. From the palace in Jerusalem to the center of Bethlehem it's about five and one-half miles. If you were to walk it, it would take you about an hour and a half. They couldn't even go an hour and a half to see this miracle attested to by the three wise men. They simply ignored the birth of the king of light and life.

I think that the biggest challenge that the church faces today is not that there are people who are against the church and its mission, I believe it's that people just don't care! They don't care enough to ask, "what is God trying to say to me?" They don't care enough to ask how is God at work in my life, or how should my life be different in light of God making himself known in this way through Jesus? And they don't see the

sign, the signs that can be all around us. Every single day the signs of God at work in the world. God at work in the life of the person who is selfish and greedy and has a change of heart and decides to become generous. God at work in the person who is so self-consumed, but then they are able to give a life of service to another person. Or the prideful person who can actually become humble. Or the hurting person who experiences healing and wellness. Or the person who is addicted, who is freed from that addiction and can now live in freedom. Or the person who is mourning the loss of a loved one and yet continues to hold on to the hope of resurrection.

The star burns brightly, and it points to Jesus. . . and what if you and I made this year a season of openness to the many different ways that God brings that revelation to light? What if you and I opened ourselves to follow the true morning star? What if you and I could be overwhelmed by joy for loves pure gift? What if you and I let Jesus navigate our lives every single day? *Will you dance, will you dance for Jesus. . . Or in awe of him be still? Will you stand in his presence. . . Or to your knees will you fall? Will you sing hallelujah. . . Will you be able to speak at all. . .? I can only imagine. I can only imagine.*

Amen

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