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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
Feast of the Epiphany/Year C
January 6, 2019
Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

“Follow His Star”

"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.'"

An angel or a star? Which of these topped your Christmas tree this year?

Growing up a crystal-like star always topped our tree. The colored lights hung on the tree reflected beautifully on the star giving the living room an almost magical aura. There is just something about the Christmas star that draws our attention. We've seen it everywhere before and during the season; on billboards, Christmas cards, stationary, in paintings, books, and suspended over outdoor and indoor crèches and altars-though I must say I did rush in here the other day to solidify my point. But alas, there is no star here on our crèche though I did breathe a sigh of relief as I looked around. There are stars on some of our banners, even on the tree. And today we have all but one song that speaks specifically of that guiding star. But for those of us who need a little more... (place star on altar)... voila`!

Oh, Christmas would not be complete without the story of the star and the Magi who followed it. Matthew is the only gospel writer who tells the story of wise men who followed the star-that “star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright”. Pope Leo the Great once wrote on the occasion of the Epiphany, “A star with brilliance appeared to three wise men in the East” that “was brighter and more beautiful than others” attracting the “eyes and hearts of those looking on.”

Actually, Matthew does not say there were three of them. He really does not tell us how many of them they were or who they were or where they came from. We don't even know if shepherds were still milling about as many depictions show or if they had simply moved on. Still, we can only

imagine that those who followed the star of Bethlehem were determined to reach their destination not just because of the brilliance of the star but because of how it was tugging at their hearts. For somehow they knew by following it they would find something, no, *someone* wondrous.

They arrived in Jerusalem a few miles off course. Had they gotten lost? Now the running joke is that had the travelers been women, they would have what? *Asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the Baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and given practical gifts.*

Still, Matthew writes that the wise men stopped by the courts to ask Herod about the child and he in turn asked the chief priests and the scribes. And I like, so many others wonder-did Herod not see the star? Hadn't the chief priests and scribes notice it? Was there not one sage among them to put this cosmic event and the prophecy of the future king of Israel together? It seems no one noticed except the foreigners who came searching for the baby.

The wise men set out again following the star until "it stopped over the place where the child was." In Bethlehem of Judea, a small backwater town, they found the child born king with his mother. The descendant of David's throne did not live within the great city or a fine palace nor did he have servants to beckon to his every need. Yet the star had led them there to *him*. They paid tribute to the child and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then they went home by another way.

Their experience of epiphany (which means "the showing forth") encompassed more than they had imagined. The whole of their journey was an epiphany for they had opened their eyes to seeing what God had put before them-a wondrous star to lead them not to just any child but to Jesus, the promised Messiah, Immanuel.

The Feast of the Epiphany commemorates the manifestation, the showing of Jesus, God Incarnate, to the peoples of the earth. Not just to some but to the whole world. The King they found came not just as the ruler and Messiah of his own people but he came for the redemption of all humankind.

Theologian and preacher Fleming Rutledge once wrote:

“The baby sought by the Wise Men was born to save, not just the good religious people, but even more, those who are *not* the chosen, *not* the beloved, *not* the initiated, *not* the deserving. This baby was born to live and die, as the apostle Paul says, “for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). But not just to die. His death would have passed forgotten had he not been God incarnate. That is the rock-bottom truth on which everything about our faith is founded.”*

Indeed, the child born in the stable was not another tiny human person but God made man. Born to show us the very face and heart and extent of God’s love in flesh.

As the Christmas season draws to a close today and as we approach the Lord’s Table and the manger once more let us come with gratitude for the gift of God’s Son born for us. May God’s gift tug at our hearts as well that might share God’s love and glory with the world.

How awesome was that star of wonder that showed those travelers the way to the Christ so long ago. May its light show us the way too!

*Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice;
Heaven sings alleluia: alleluia the earth replies.*

*O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!*

*taken from “*Who are those Magi?*” a sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany, 1997, in *The Bible and the New York Times* by Fleming Rutledge