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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/4/2015, Epiphany Sunday  
Matthew 2:1-12  
Always Some Star

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

<sup>11</sup>and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. (Matthew 2:11, RSV)

Years later, when the Wise Men are old and grey, sitting around the fireplace and reminiscing, I bet they could say, “Didn’t we have us *some time* back in those long-ago days when we followed that star!” By the world’s good reckoning, these old men in their rocking chairs have the wisdom of old age and good seasoning. But in their own eyes, they might well say, “We were at our best, yes, we were at our wisest in those younger days when we followed that star all the way to Bethlehem and fell down and worshiped that Child! It has made all the difference in life to have found that in this old world, and this grand universe we have been studying so long, there is in fact *something* worth worshiping — Someone worth worshiping!”

We can well be happy for those Wise Men that they followed their star, and found One to worship. But, my friends, I want to urge this good news upon you too: The Lord does not confine his star just to the Wise Men of old. He also grants to you and me some star worth following — some star that would lead us into a new world. And if we have already found that new world, then our Maker sends us a star that would lead us even more deeply into the wonders of that new world if we be willing.

Let me, then, speak of humanity in various stages and conditions of life, and try to suggest that the Lord is providing you with a star, beckoning you onward into some new and better world. Such a sermon could be a long one, I bet, depending upon how many sorts of people and stages of life we consider. In this particular Epiphany Sunday sermon, let me speak of three groups: (1) young people, (2) people who have not yet found Christ, and (3) the elderly. You folks in the vigor of middle-age, or in some other condition of human life, well, I fear that you are going to have to wait till another sermon to discuss your particular star. Maybe next year’s Epiphany Sunday sermon. Or better yet, maybe there will be a little something in what I say to the other groups that you can extrapolate and apply to your own soul. I have prayed so.

## THE YOUNG

Let me begin, then, with the young. And immediately I hasten to say to you what St. Paul said to Timothy:

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12, KJV)

Do you often think of yourself in such good terms — as an example to other believers in word, in charity, in faith, and in purity? I do. I think of many of you that way. You are congregational leaders in the making — worthy to be members of the Trustees, the Deacons, and the Church Council. In fact, I count some of you ready right here and now to be our leaders. That's because your youth carries certain advantages with it. You might suppose me to mean your strength and energy, and certainly those are good traits. But when I commend you, it is not simply for your strength and energy, but also for your idealism and, would you believe it, your innocence compared to us older folks who might have walked for too long now in some unworthy paths. You have not yet made your compromises with the devil and learned to live with them. You have not yet started down sinful paths that have become so familiar to you that you can hardly imagine life anymore without them.

You are still young enough to be inspired. You can hear the Sermon on the Mount, for example, and your heart can beat a bit faster, and you can be led by the preaching of Jesus to imagine a better world and to long for it. We older folks, on the other hand, can become almost deaf to the preaching of Jesus. We have heard it for some long, and we have permitted ourselves to be unmoved by it for so long, that the star with which God would lead us — I mean the preaching of the Bible and the faith of the Church — hardly tugs on our hearts anymore. We hear the noble mission Christ gives to the church: Go, win souls to Christ, baptize them, and teach them the faith of the church. We hear those words but they leave us dry, parched, unmoved. We hear Jesus say, “Love your enemies, pray for those who do you wrong, if you are struck on one side of the face, turn thou the other side to be struck too.” You young ones can hear that preaching and be led to imagine a better world, while we older ones are tempted to say, “That's naïve!” and dream our dreams of comeuppance and revenge. You young ones, I say, are often the innocent ones among us. You are the ones who can still be inspired by Jesus.

Think of King David, for example. When he was a boy, he was a veritable giant of faith. It was when he was young that he stood up to lion and bear that would hurt his flock. His sense of vocation as a boy was such that he would rather fight and die against the bear than abandon his flock. Again, it was when he was young that he stood ready to defy that giant Goliath. The older, seasoned soldiers were useless in that confrontation. The matures ones simply quaked in their boots before the giant. But the young, idealistic David was ready to contend with that

giant — aye, and to defeat him too! But alas, when David grew older his faith declined and his soul became soiled. It was as a grown man full of responsibilities that David murdered Uriah and slept with the poor man's wife. He could be forgiven, yes, and he was. But the remainder of his career was a depressed and broken one. David was a better man when he was a young man.

And the noble story of Joseph resisting Potiphar's wife, well, that took place when Joseph was a young man (Genesis 39). He could have yielded to her. It probably would have been fun in some measure. And it might have been the expedient thing to do. But he declined that adultery, with the result that he was thrown into prison. But so be it. Even within the prison he did no wrong. The Bible speaks of no charges he brought against his master's wife. He simply took with faith and peace what the Lord's hand brought him. As a young person, he was a model for believers of faith and purity.

Think of the three young men thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's burning, fiery furnace. Does the Bible record a more brave, a more faithful answer than that of these three young men?

<sup>17</sup>If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup>But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18, RSV)

I am afraid that we cannot take it for granted that these three young men would have answered equally so well if they had been older, weighed down by the cares of life and well established in their compromises.

Mary the mother of our Lord was a young girl when she gave consent to the great wonder and mystery of the holy incarnation of our God.

John the Baptist fulfilled his ministry and suffered death as a young man. And most remarkable of all, our Lord Jesus won the salvation of the world as a young man. He was the age of some of you when he died on the cross — thirty-three years of age, the tradition says.

No, let no one despise your youth. You have the same star that we older ones have too: you have the Bible, the faith of the church, and the example of holy men and women in your life. You have the same star the rest of us have, but for you, I sometimes think that the star shines a bit brighter. The eyes of us older ones have become dim in many ways. But you are the ones who can still see and feel and be moved by the star the Lord gives you.

So, God bless you young ones. Follow your star. Let it lead you even closer to Jesus.

## UNBELIEVERS

Now let us speak of people who do not yet believe in Jesus or who might have lost their faith. This part of the sermon, then, is meant for parents who grieve over wayfaring children, or for anyone who is sad because someone they love does not love Jesus. I hope I can give you some encouragement by way of the story of Epiphany, for it seems to me that the example of the Wise Men is of particular importance for those who do not yet believe in Jesus.

Let's begin with this thought: a great thing about the Wise Men is that they were pagans. The heroes of today's high story were not born into the faith of Israel. They did not know the Bible. They did not know the stories of sacred scripture. They had their own faith or denials of faith. So, they were not believers in the ancient faith of Israel. But there is one good thing we can say about them with confidence: whatever it was they believed in, they believed in it with full integrity.

In my opinion, the Church should not fear Muslims being Muslims or Buddhists being Buddhists or atheists being atheists. What it should fear is the same thing it should fear in herself: laziness and lukewarmness. The Wise Men of today's story were strange people of faith, according to Biblical standards. They might have been astrologers, they might have been primitive scientists, they might have been worshipers of the stars. Whatever they were, when they discovered the star, they did not ignore it, they did not deny it, but rather they investigated it and followed it with all their hearts, whithersoever it should lead them. And it led them to Jesus.

Perhaps I am being the hopeless idealist here, but I suspect that what this world needs is for people of faith to follow their faith with their whole hearts. Let Muslims be good Muslims, let Buddhists be good Buddhists, let scientists be good scientists. Let each one seek the highest standards of their own faith. Let each one follow the star they have discovered in their own faith. Let them not yield to popular opinion or the pressure of the professional guilds. Let them not ignore or suppress the star they have found, but let them follow it with full earnestness. Then, one day, if they should find the manger with the Christ Child, or if they should find a Christian who is truly walking with Christ, then they will be ready. If they have been high in integrity in their own faith, they might well be ready to recognize the goodness of Jesus. Who knows? They might even fall before him and give to him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Nothing good will come from the pagans being lazy. Let them follow the example of the Wise Men in this morning's story: Their faith might have been pagan and strange, but they followed it with integrity, and in the following, they put themselves into the position of being able one day to worship the Christ Child.

We should be confident that the God who created the human mind and the human heart will never leave the human mind and heart entirely alien to Jesus — or him entirely alien to any human heart. If we are not yet believers in Jesus, let us follow the highest principles of whatever it is we do believe in, and one day, visit

Bethlehem again. See for yourself what you think of Jesus this time. Perhaps you too will fall down before him and worship him at last.

## **THE ELDERLY**

Following this liturgy, I will do what I have been doing once a month for many years now: I will visit Carnegie East, which is a residence for the elderly. I mean to read the Bible stories for them, preach to them, and bring the Blessed Sacrament to them. So, how could I speak of the various ages and conditions of humanity without speaking too of the elderly?

I said earlier in this sermon that the Lord provides a star for the young, calls them to journey closer to him, and indeed can make much good use of them. We spoke of the example of young David, Joseph, and Mary the mother of our Lord. But this praise of the young is not the entirety of the truth of the Bible. The Bible also loves the elderly and awaits their ministry.

Think of two lovely recent examples: Simeon and Anna. They greet the Christ Child in the Temple. They have lived long and faithful and righteous lives, and have followed the stars in their lives faithfully until at last, they too see the Christ Child and bless him.

And think of Moses. The Bible says that he led the people of Israel in the wilderness for forty years. They were sometimes a cantankerous people, and living in the wilderness could not have been easy. I mean, I have been pastor of this congregation for twenty-three years, and occasionally — rarely, but sometimes — I am left bleary-eyed and foggy-brained by my ministry and wondering how I am going to drag myself home at the end of the day. That might be true for you too and for many people in their various professions. But Moses, bless him, led the whole people of Israel for forty years, and his final sermon to them was probably his greatest — the massive and majestic sermon represented by the book of Deuteronomy. Now, there was a man who followed the leading of the Lord, even when he was elderly.

There is something precious about the prayers of the elderly. I believe that the Lord especially loves to hear their prayers. And there is something wonderfully impressive about the testimony of the elderly. When some grey-haired saint of the church, some grandmother or grandfather in the faith, says to others, “I have walked with Jesus many a year now and do not regret a thing. I commend Christ to you,” well, that carries a lot of weight. If some young scholar or some important politician were to say the same thing, it would probably be less moving for us than if Grandmother or Grandfather or some elderly person we have known and respected should say it.

As long as our hearts are beating, I believe that the Lord sends us each one a star, beckoning us onward to some form of service, to some deepening of faith, and the offering up of prayers and testimonies to the One we have found, the holy Child of Bethlehem, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.