

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/3/2016, Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

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

As I read my opening text for you, please notice the sense of motion in the Epiphany star. This scene takes place after the Wise Men visit King Herod in Jerusalem:

...and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.
(Matthew 2:9, RSV)

The Wise Men rejoiced when they saw that star. It seems that they had lost sight of the star when they entered the palace in Jerusalem to ask about the newborn King of the Jews. It was natural that they should have done so — to have sought a royal child in the capitol city — but there is a hint of uneasiness in them at losing their star. This uneasiness is revealed by their joy when they leave the great city, head off toward the town of Bethlehem, and find their star again.

Perhaps this star was a specially-created star, smaller and closer to hand than God's stars millions of miles off in space. It is hard to see how distant stars like that could be said to move and to rest over Bethlehem in such a way that would distinguish their position there from over Jerusalem. This star moved before the Wise Men, as the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night led the Israelites of old. This star led the caravan from the east all the way to the manger in Bethlehem.

And stars still lead people to the Christ Child. In fact, in this year of our Lord 2016, it is our great joy and privilege to see four of these stars leading a little one to Christ. I mean Kari and Jon McCafferty, along with godparents Patrick and Tina, who are leading little Maren Noelle McCafferty to Christ. They are bringing her to her Baptism, entrusting her to Jesus and Jesus to her.

One of the old preachers used a lovely saying to praise the Wise Men. That good saying goes this way: "these men saw the Infinite in the infant."¹ That is why they "fell down and worshiped him" and gave him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They recognized the Infinite in the infant. They recognized their Maker lying in the manger.

But I'd like to take this lovely saying and redirect it toward little Maren Noelle. I do believe that Kari and Jon, Patrick and Tina, see something of the infinite in infant Maren. I do not mean that Maren is divine, but rather that her parents and godparents see something of infinite worth in her, and so they have hastened off to

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, "The Star and the Wise Men," 1882.

lead her to Christ. It is the very best thing they can do for her. It is the very best thing we can do for ourselves and others: we can lead ourselves and others as best we can to Christ.

If we bear the Name of Jesus, then it is inevitable that we are stars shining for him. The soul-searching question is whether we shine well for him or poorly. When we were baptized, the same thing was said to us as will be said to Maren Noelle later in this liturgy. The baptism candle is lit and handed to the parents, along with the solemn words of Jesus:

Maren, you are the light of the world. (rf. Matthew 5:14)

That is from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus continues his discussion of light this way:

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.
(Matthew 5:16, KJV)

The great thing about this morning's liturgy is that we will see four people right here among us doing what Jesus asked of them: they are letting their own light so shine that little Maren will have a chance to glorify our Father who is in heaven. These four are being Epiphany stars. They are leading their little one to Jesus. Let us all shine on as they do. Let us all so shine that we will save some souls this year — or least do what we can in that direction. We might not be rock stars, but we can be these holy stars — Epiphany stars leading others to Christ.

So, here are some points about that — about being Epiphany stars for Christ. First, as the Biblical star led people to Jesus, so should we. There are lots of things to teach our children and lots of ways of trying to influence humanity, but among them all, we should include pointing others to Jesus. We should shine on for him. Second, that original star did not merely shine for Jesus, it also moved toward him. In fact, that's how the Wise Men got there — they followed the star as it moved toward Jesus. That star was no message flashing in the night, informing the Wise Men to head to Bethlehem. Rather, the star moved to the same place the Wise Men were to go: to Jesus. And I do think it will forever be so: that we best lead others to Jesus when we ourselves are drawing near to him. And my third point about being an Epiphany star is that we serve Christ best by resting in him. That star settled over the place where Jesus was born. It was as if it was in no mood to hasten onwards. No, the star had found the Saviour and lingered there with him. Likewise with us, we will shine best for Jesus if we not only move closer to him, but also if will take our rest in him. That means, we should be happy stars this coming year. If we would really shine for him in such a way as to draw others toward him, then we should permit being near him to give us some joy in life — some joy in what otherwise can be a hard world.

So, let's take these three points in order. First, to be a good Epiphany star for others, we should point them toward Jesus. An Epiphany star that doesn't even try to lead others to Christ is a failing and fading star. It has misunderstood its purpose.

For this first point, I am happy again to think of this morning's baptism. Here we have a living example of people leading others to Jesus. I know Kari and Jon. They are devout, earnest parents. So, we have parents and godparents leading little Maren to Jesus. It is their deliberate intention to do so. They will promise to raise Maren in the church. They will promise to do what they can to help their child to walk as becomes the gospel of Jesus Christ. They will bring Maren to the One who loves the little children and who says:

Let the children come to me; do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. (Mark 10:14)

There are many important things for parents to teach their children and for people to teach one another. But among them, if we be Christians, is this: that we will try to teach our children and others about Jesus. We do not want to be candles hid under a basket, but on a candlestick, giving light to the house. We are to be like a city set on a hill. We cannot be missed (Matthew 5). There should be something about us that puts others in mind of Jesus. With our words and with our deeds, we should try to point others to Christ.

Second, about the Biblical star moving toward Jesus, that should be so for us too in this coming year, 2016, and evermore. We should not be all glitter and no substance. We should not only tell a good tale about Jesus, but even more we should move closer to him this coming year. Others might well follow us if we are drawing nearer to Jesus, but if we are simply talking the talk about him, and not ourselves living for him, then the world will notice and be discouraged by us.

Earlier this fall, someone showed me around Poughkeepsie in upstate New York. My guide proudly point out the Overlook Drive-in Theatre, which, I was told, is one of the last drive-in theaters in America. Maybe you remember such drive-ins. Maybe you remember that big screen lit up in the nighttime. Well, the Epiphany star was not that kind of thing. It did not shine in the far eastern sky and bid the Wise Men to be off to Bethlehem. No, that star moved toward our Lord too. That is the best kind of star for Jesus — the one that wants to be with him. Let it be so for you and me going forward: that we do not bid people go to a Christ that we ourselves do not visit, but rather, let us try to fetch others to Christ precisely because first of all, we are fetching ourselves there. Integrity. I am speaking of integrity in bearing the name of Jesus. Jesus bids us come unto him:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, KJV)

Let us try to hear this invitation with new ears this coming year. Let us permit ourselves to be moved by Christ. Let us care about him more than every before. Let us learn of him even more, imitate him, fall down and worship him as did those Wise Men so long ago.

So, this second point has been about motion. As the Epiphany star moved and drew nearer to Jesus, let us try to do the same this coming year.

And my third point is that we should permit ourselves to take some joy in drawing near to Jesus. We hear nothing in the Bible about that star hastening onwards once it reached Bethlehem. It did not manifest the attitude, “Well, that job is done. I’ve led these Wise Men to Bethlehem, and now I mean to move on to some other work.” No, the last thing we hear about the star is simply that it stopped over Bethlehem:

...and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.
(Matthew 2:9, RSV)

It “came to rest” over Jesus, as if it had reached home, it had reached its Saviour.

Let this also be true of us. A few weeks back, we heard the Apostle Paul speak of joy:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice...Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:4-6)

We noted that the first call to joy was not enough for Paul. He had to redouble his call: “*again* I will say rejoice.” The apostle thinks that, come what may, we have reason for joy in Christ. Shipwrecks, beatings, betrayals — Paul knew such things, but did not permit them to deprive him a fundamental cheerfulness about life.

We do not know all that this year before us, 2016, will bring. I hope it brings you health and happiness. Especially I am thinking of that for Kari and Jon and Maren, Patrick and Tina. I hope that this coming year is the start of the greatest and happiest time in their lives. But come what may, let each of us linger over Bethlehem’s stable and Bethlehem’s Savior and permit ourselves to be cheered up by him. Those Wise Men of old were happy people. Their journey had been worth it. In Jesus they found Someone who gave them reason to fall on their knees, to worship him, and to give him their good gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Life was changed for them. Life was better because of the One they had found.

This coming year will no doubt have its twists and turns, its joys and its sorrows. But in finding Jesus we have found the One who will never misplace us, nor fail us, nor lose interest in us, but rather will cherish and save us come what may. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.