

“Follow Your Star ”

January 3, 2021

Matthew 2: 1-12

A sermon preached by Rev. Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Today is the Sunday when we celebrate Epiphany. Epiphany concludes the traditional 12 day celebration of Christmas. Epiphany commemorates the arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem where they greet the new born Messiah, Jesus Christ. Sometimes we use the word epiphany to describe a moment of sudden or great revelation that changes us in some way. An epiphany moment. From a faith perspective it might imply how God’s presence breaks into our world. An epiphany experience is like a light shining in the darkness; an illumination of something which has been hidden. Today, on this Epiphany Sunday, we consider how the wise men followed their shining star and what it means for us to follow the light of Jesus Christ today.

Prayer for Understanding

Word of life, made flesh in Jesus, speak to us now. May we see your glory, experience your grace, and live your truth and love. Remind us of the love we knew at our birth, the love even now being reborn within us. Give us the courage to embrace the change your word demands and the boldness to proclaim your love to this world through our words and our actions. Amen.

Read Matthew 2: 1-12

All the members of my family are big Star Wars fans. I have lost count of how many Star Wars movies there are now, and I have always found them to be a bit confusing because they were not released in chronological order. What I do know is that Stars Wars is the

proverbial battle between the forces of good (characterized by the light) and evil (the dark). It has a theological sound to it that always resonated with me: the light shining in the darkness and the darkness not overcoming it. There is in that statement from the Gospel of John an assumption that God is always more powerful than evil. However, we live in a world where the evil continues to exist. Perhaps to test us; to see what side we will align ourselves with and at what cost. In the Star Wars series Luke Skywalker is one of the good guys – he is a Jedi, fighting for the forces of the light. Darth Vader is the bad guy; a good guy originally but his goodness has been distorted by his woundedness which is characterized by the dark side. My favorite character is the little short green guy with the big ears who seems to be smarter than all of the good guys put together – Yoda. The great Jedi teacher/mentor. Yoda is always reminding Luke Skywalker of who he is as a follower of the light. As a bastion of wisdom he says: “Remember that you are what you grow beyond. And failures are our greatest teachers.”

This morning’s scripture reading reflects the same struggle between the forces of good/light and the forces of evil/darkness. And the question becomes, where do we find ourselves in this epic battle?

In Bethlehem a baby has been born to an ordinary young couple. And, according to Matthew, this young couple lives in a land which is governed by the Romans. It was the Roman custom that when the empire conquered a foreign land, they appointed local folks to be kings or rulers over certain districts. King Herod was appointed to be King over the land in which Mary and Joseph lived. King Herod is the villain in this story - Darth Vader – a bad guy with a capital “B”. King Herod will go to any length to maintain the status quo; to insure his power and control, even if it means murdering baby boys. He is not interested in change unless it benefits him in some way. So, while Mary and Joseph, an innocent young couple, are cradling new life

in their arms - we are reminded that evil is lurking in the person of King Herod. And as any good story goes, the good guys will enviably encounter the bad guys. Whenever Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Herod wakes up in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, off in a foreign land, there are wise men have seen something strange in the skies; a bizarre light. They believe that this light symbolizes that something new is about to occur which will change the world; they believe that it might be a sign concerning the birth of the Messiah, king of the Jews. And so, they set out on a journey, following this strange and brilliant light in the sky, inquiring as they pass through villages and towns, about the possible birth of the Messiah.

Two things strike me about the wise men, and maybe this is why Matthew refers to them as “wise”. They set out on a journey without knowing with certainty what the destination might be. Isn’t that true for all of us? Isn’t that true of the community of faith? We are on a journey and there is no way we can know what only God knows and what the destination will be. These wise men trust that if they are attentive to the signs around them and pursue the light, they will be guided. And second, they spend their time studying the skies. When we gaze at the stars in the heavens, we are looking beyond ourselves to what God is doing in the world and that seems to put our own individual lives into perspective. The possibilities for the future become limitless. I am truly awed by these wise men that gazed at the stars and saw something that empowered them to set out on a journey to who knows where. In a world of darkness, where the Herods of the world are intent of destroying whatever threatens their power, we are called to look up, consider the world from God’s perspective and follow the light of God’s star.

These wise men arrive in Jerusalem, inquiring about the Messiah who has been born. King Herod gets wind of their search for a new King of the Jews and he goes berserk - literally.

He, with great cunning, pretends to be just as anxious to worship this new king as they are. Evil is deceptive like that sometimes. Herod instructs the wise men to continue their journey and when they have found the baby, return and inform him of the baby's location so that he will also be able to go and worship this child. Herod hopes that in his pretense, the wise men will unwittingly lead him to the threat to his empire

The wise men, not swayed by Herod's deception, wealth and power, continue to follow the light/good. And that star leads them to the stable, full of energy and new life. Isn't it interesting that God leads them to Bethlehem via Jerusalem and King Herod? It is as though God wanted the wise men to encounter King Herod. Is God stirring up trouble here? In order to worship the king in Bethlehem, the wise men must pass through Jerusalem and disturb King Herod. Sometimes it is when we encounter the darkness, that we understand with greater clarity our need to follow God's light.

How did they pay homage/worship the Messiah?

They brought gifts fit for a king. The gold and the frankincense fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: "Nations will come to your light; they shall bring gold and frankincense." The myrrh was considered an ointment used to prepare a body for burial. Was Matthew saying that Jesus would fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah and that the Messiah would suffer and die?

The dawn breaks forth in Bethlehem and the wise men know it is time to leave the stable. No, they would not be going back through Jerusalem. None of their old maps worked anymore. They would find another way home, a new way.

As the New Year begins for us, we are reminded that the powers of darkness are still lurking. But the story of the magi instructs us to lift our eyes to the skies, past the problems, and look for the star of God's presence. It's there. And it will lead us to new life if we are willing to

make a journey, embrace the change it will necessitate (for we too will have to find another way home) and are faithful to God and each other while we journey. We are what we grow beyond.

