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 Epiphany

Follow the Light
Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage."³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born.⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
 are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
 for from you shall come a ruler
 who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.'"*

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Well, the ***Christmas chaos is starting to lessen*** a bit for most of us.

Once we get past the New Year's holiday,
 it will be back to 'normal', whatever that is.

We'll put away the tree and decorations.

And take down the lights...

And things will look....well, to me they can look kind of bleak.

It's that midwinter bleakness, where everything is cold and a little dreary.
 The days are cloudy, without much light.

During this time of year, many of us long
For a little more light—outside, and in our hearts and lives.

During Christmas, there's so much to hold our attention, all the shopping, eating, decorating, parties and gatherings.
 But after Christmas, well, then it seems like things just kind of drop off, right?

But for the church,
Christmas is still going on.
 It's more than just December 25th.
It's 12 days long, ending on January 6th, or Epiphany.

Epiphany is the day we remember the ***wise men*** following the special star. Epiphany means a revelation, Which is exactly what the astrologers from the East received. They followed a new star, a special light—and it led them to the light of the world.

Epiphany is about ***Following the light.***
 The light that we really need right now,
 for all the different kinds of darkness that we face.

As we celebrate Epiphany I wonder,
what lights are we following today?
What will we follow this year?
 Are we following the ***bright lights of the world***—
 success, money, power, fame?
 Or are we following something that ***brings life*** to us?
 Are we following the ***light of Christ*** that breaks into the darkness?

The Gospel of ***John Chapter 1*** talks about the light of Christ:
What has come into being ⁴ *in him was **life**,*^[a] *and the life was the **light** of all people.* ⁵ *The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* ⁶ *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.* ⁷ *He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.* ⁸ *He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.* ⁹ *The **true light**, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*^[b]

We ***don't know everything about the light*** that the wise men followed,

that Bethlehem star.

Some say it was ***Jupiter and Saturn*** coming together in the night sky, near the time of Jesus' birth.

Some say that different stars and planets had different meanings, and historical events were often preceded by special constellations in the night sky.

So, if Jupiter symbolized the king of the heavens, and Saturn symbolized the protector of Israel, when the two together could predict a new King of the Jews.

Whatever the actual event, these wise men saw a special star in the sky, and they set out on a ***journey to find the newborn King of the Jews***.

The story is about ***following a great light***,
And finding ***the light of the world***.

It's a ***favorite Christmas tale*** of adventure and discovery, a story that was at one time circulated ***even more*** than the story of Christ's birth.

Today we ***combine*** the nativity scene and the wise men. We have the three wise men right there beside the shepherds, But that's ***not really accurate***.

The scriptures talk about them entering a house—so they probably arrived when Jesus was a toddler, not an infant lying in the manger.

We've taken all kinds of ***liberties*** with the epiphany story. We sing we three kings, but that was something started in the sixth century. Over the years tradition even ***named*** the three men: **Balthasar** of Arabia, **Melchior** of Persia, and **Gaspar** of India. But all of that is conjecture.

The Bible only says that they were ***wise men who brought three gifts***. All we know for sure is that these wise men from the East, watched the night sky for signs. And one day, they saw something so unusual, so spectacular, that they decided to ***follow a star***—all the way to Jesus.

These wise men were ***not Jewish*** people of faith that we know of,

Yet they were drawn to the Jewish newborn king!
And according to Matthew, they did not come all the way to Jerusalem out of mere astrological curiosity.

What did they do when they arrived in Jerusalem?

They **marched right up to Herod**,

and asked where they could find the King of the Jews!

Where is the child, we observed his star, and have come to pay him homage!

Wasn't that a little gutsy, or crazy, to ask the current king where a new one has been born?

Yet that's exactly what they did.

And **homage**—that was reserved for royalty.

It means falling on the knees and face, kissing the hand of a ruler, or kneeling in respect and worship.

In other words, that would have been the **appropriate response to Herod**,

Not to a newborn child in Bethlehem!

Their visit did more than just upset Herod, the Bible says

*When King Herod heard this, he was **frightened**, and **all Jerusalem with him**; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born*

The priests and scribes

told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet.

Then they **quoted Micah 2:6**:

⁶*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,*

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler

*who is to **shepherd**^[d] my people Israel."*

In Hebrew to shepherd means to **feed, tend, nourish, and cherish**.

This was not exactly a description of King Herod's rule (remember he would order the murder of all young boys after this), so he was right to be worried!

So **why did they follow this star**, that stopped above the house of a toddler named Jesus?

Because this **light changed their lives**,

from the time they spotted the brilliant star in the night sky!
Following this light led to a Savior!

When they found Jesus' home, Matthew says:

*When they saw that the star had stopped,^[a] they were **overwhelmed with joy.***

*¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, **they offered him gifts** of gold, (a symbol of power) frankincense (a fragrant spice for temple incense), and myrrh (a costly perfume, used for embalming).*

These are the kinds of gifts that **Herod would have been expecting** to open when they arrived at his home!

These men who watched the night sky for signs, followed the **greatest sign** they had ever seen—and it changed them forever. They didn't just go home by another road to avoid the wrath of Herod, they went home as **new people**, with **new lives and new purpose**.

So the question for us today, as we celebrate epiphany, is this:

How are we following in their footsteps?

Are we ***following the light of Christ*** in our lives?

What is ***our sign, our special star?***

We may not have an actual star,

but what about the ***Bible***, and it's directions for our lives?

Are we looking to it for direction?

What about the ***Holy Spirit*** in our hearts, to prompt and guide us?

Are we listening to it's guidance?

What about the ***body of Christ***, the other believers all around us?

Are we turning to our brothers and sisters in Christ for help and encouragement?

What if in this new year, ***we let ourselves be led by Christ's light?***

What if doing that changed our lives?

What if it brought us purpose? Meaning?

What if we let ourselves be led by the wonder and excitement of God in our midst, of Jesus shining a light into our lives?

What if we arrive at a place where we see clearly,
and we are ***filled with unexplainable joy? Doesn't that sound great?***

Following the light of Christ is the best path,
But it's ***risky***, isn't it?

We have to set out on the path that God puts before us,
not one of our own making—and that isn't easy!

We ***prefer to chart our own path*** through life, don't we?

It's easier to make our own plans—and ask God to bless them,
instead of waiting for God to direct and lead us!

Listen to the wise words of Proverbs 3:1-6:

*My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;*

²*for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare they will give you.*

³*Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.*

⁴....

⁵*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.*

⁶*In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

What if that's the ***key to following the light of Christ?***

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own insight.....
And ***he will make*** your paths straight.

Isn't that what we need?

For ***God to guide us***, instead of our own insight?

So—what about us?

What are we doing?

Are ***we just making our own plans*** for this new year?
Or are we genuinely asking God to lead us this year—
 wherever that takes us?

As I was praying this week about the new year, I was reminded--
 That ***following God's light, does not guarantee an easy journey.***
 In fact, just like the wise men we will meet Herods who lie, and threaten us,
 who are jealous of God.
 We will of course be tempted to a lukewarm faith,
 like those chief priests and scribes,
 who didn't even bother to see if the Messiah had been born!

But if we do follow the light, we've been told—that we will find our Savior!
 We will find the source of life,
 a light that shines in our darkness.
 Who doesn't want that?

But ***how do we know it is the light of Christ*** that we are following?
 I wonder, if we can tell by the way we are being led.
 Are we being ***protected, nurtured, cherished, and liberated?***
 Are we finding ***peace, hope, love, and joy?***
 That's the ***light of Jesus Christ!***

But what if we are ***overwhelmed*** with stress, sorrow, despair, or desperation?
 What if we are ***tempted*** with money, fame, or power?
 That is ***not the light*** of Christ.

We know that all of our journeys to Jesus are ***unique***,
 but also know some things are ***true for everyone*** who follows Christ.
 Jesus ***brings light*** into our darkness.
 God ***protects*** us along the way, and ***sustains*** us through suffering.
 God ***helps us see things*** more clearly,
 And God's light brings ***comfort, peace, and joy!***

Our passage from ***Isaiah 60*** today talks about this:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
 and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*
² *For darkness shall cover the earth,*

and thick darkness the peoples;
 but the Lord will arise upon you,
 and his glory will appear over you.
³ Nations shall come to your light,
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
 ...⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]

Your heart shall thrill, and rejoice.

That sounds good, doesn't it?

When we follow God's light, **our hearts do rejoice!**
 So much so, that we want to **bring our best gifts to God!**

Just as the wise men were so overwhelmed with joy that they brought their finest gifts, we too come to places where prayers have been answered, Where we have been given a second chance, Where we know that God has sustained and carried us, And our gratitude for this grace **compels us to give our best!**

Those who have **received abundantly want to give extravagantly!**
 Like Mary, who poured the expensive oil on the feet of Jesus,
 like the Magi who brought treasure chests of gold, frankincense, and myrrh,
 we too have received so much of God's grace,
 that we want to give our best in return!

Today the children are writing down what they can give to God this year, in the spirit of the wise men.

What about us?

What can we give?

What is our best gift for God?

In 1872 the poet **Christina Rossetti** wrote a beautiful poem that only appeared after her death. About thirty years later the poem was set to music and titled "A Christmas Carol." Today, we know it as "In the Bleak Midwinter." Rossetti was a devoted Christian, who for many years volunteered at the St. Mary Magdalene "house of charity," a refuge for women coming out of a life of prostitution.

In the Victorian Era of her day, impoverished women often had to sell their bodies. Some of the "women" were only twelve years old.

Rossetti's efforts in offering Christ and helping find better jobs for these marginalized women came through in some of her poems.

For instance, this Christmas carol pictures a Savior who entered our world of suffering and brokenness—a "the bleak mid-winter" like Rossetti's native England.

In light of Christ's great power and love, Rossetti's poem asks:

***What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?***

This question would have weighed heavily on women struggling to come out of a life of prostitution. With their broken lives, what could they possibly give to Jesus, ...According to Rossetti's poem, there is one thing that all of us can give Christ—no matter who we are.

She wrote:

*If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
**Yet what I can I give Him,
Give Him my heart.***

From the blog of Karen Swallow Prior, called The Best Christmas Ever, Her.meneutics blog (12-22-10).

Isn't that what God really wants from us?
Our ***heart***? How can we give our hearts?

That's not easy—we have so many things that demand so much of us.
But God is the one who wants our heart.
Our love, our devotion, our worship,
our first fruits of time, talent, and money,
Will we give God our heart—this year?

And ***what will we follow this year to get to that place of giving?***
Will we follow ***our own plans***, or those of the ***world***?
Or will we ***follow the One who brings life?***
Will we follow the ***light of Christ***—the light that shines in the darkness?

May we all follow the true light, and give our best to the King. Amen.