

Sermon preached on **Matthew 2:1-12** on January 3, 2016 by Pastor Ben Kuerth of Victory of the Lamb Lutheran Church.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:⁶ ""But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.""⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Navigate Life by the Light

One of the top Christmas gifts a decade ago was a Garmin GPS device. Remember that little jingle? "Give-a, give-a, give-a Garmin." I got one that year. What an amazing device. They were pretty new. My Garmin GPS gave me everything I needed to find my way just about anywhere. No more arguing about whether I should stop at the nearest gas station to ask for directions. Behold the GPS! Of course I had to get rid of my Garmin when the maps became so outdated I couldn't even find my way through the Marquette interchange anymore. And as quickly as Garmin's stock soared over \$100 a share, it plummeted just a few years later when anyone with a smartphone could use Google Maps. I've got a GPS in my pocket now. That's pretty slick.

But of course you still have to type in the right destination, don't you? Have you ever typed in an address for Franklin, *TN* instead of Franklin, *WI*? Take it from me, they're not the same! And so GPS might help you *get* you where you're going. But what about *where* you're going? How can you be sure you're headed to the right destination? How can you be sure you're on the right journey through life?

Well do you think that those "Magi" from the east might have asked themselves that question? I mean what a journey they were on! Hundreds of miles. Across or around a vast desert. No GPS. Just a star in the sky pointing them to Jerusalem. Just some ancient prophecies and stories about a king being born. Don't you wonder if, as they were packing up their caravan leaving Persia, any of those wise men ever wise cracked, "Well, I hope your right, Melchior, you do know how long this will take, don't you? You do you know how difficult and expensive this is going to be, right? Are you sure about this journey?"

And they when they got to Jerusalem—the moment they were waiting for—the capital, the palace, the place where you'd expect all the paparazzi to be taking pictures of the child king, what did they find? They found that no one seemed to know anything about it. What a let-down I imagine it must have been to get there! You ever feel this way in life? You ever experience a great let-down after getting your hopes up sky high? You ever feel like your life has been a difficult journey through a wilderness only to reach a destination called disappointment? Do you ever wonder if it's worth it to keep pursuing God, to pray to God, to go to church, or to follow after Jesus Christ? Do you feel like giving up hope wondering if you're on the right journey?

The Bible says, *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."* Well there was a reason these Magi made the long trip from the East as far-fetched as it might have seemed at the start. And it wasn't just to satisfy their curiosity. It wasn't just to check off something on their bucket list. It wasn't just for the fun of it. They had come to find a king. A king worthy of their highest hopes, their ultimate trust, their worship. So they were willing to undertake such a long journey across a desert because it was fueled by faith. Their faith in things yet unseen. Their faith grasping promises yet unfulfilled. They had what we all need in life to keep us going forward. They had *hope*. And along the way their hope was kept alive by a star that guided their steps. Because somewhere somehow they had read about and about heard God's promise of a Savior.

Of course, so had Herod, except he had a very different reaction to this so-called Messianic king.³ *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* You want to know what Herod was like? He was a cruel, paranoid, murderer. You see, Herod had not been born king of the Jews. In fact he wasn't even a Jew. He was an Edomite. He had been appointed king over the Jews by Romans. As a puppet king of Rome, Herod was a cruel and capricious man whose favorite pastime, besides women, was literally killing everyone around him who threatened his position as king. Among many others, he killed 3 of his own sons, his favorite wife, a mother and brother-in-law, an uncle, and 300 hundred court officials who protested the execution of two of his sons. As a sad part of this story he would have all the baby boys 2 years old and younger in Bethlehem killed in attempt to get rid of baby Jesus.

So do you get a sense of why the Magi's visit caused such a commotion in Jerusalem? Given their status, the Magi probably traveled with an escort of cavalry and an entourage. So when these Magi, these exotic visitors from far away, these Gentiles, start asking questions about another king of the Jews, is it any wonder the Bible says, *"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him"*? Because you see when Herod is upset, everybody's upset, because when Herod's upset, heads start to roll.

But you know what shocks me the most in this account though? It's the answer that Herod gets from the Bible scholars of his day. When the Magi wanted to know where the boy king had been born, what did Herod do? He consulted the Bible experts. I guess you could say it's to his credit, kind of, that Herod knew enough about the prophecies to go to the Scriptures. But did you catch the answer the experts gave him? It was basically this, "Well, Herod, of course, we all know that the Messiah is supposed to born in nearby Bethlehem. That's exactly what Micah the prophet has foretold hundreds of years ago."

I mean can you believe this? This never ceases to amaze me. It wasn't like the people of that day were clueless about God's promises. In fact, they knew all the details of the prophecies, better than many people today. They buried their noses in the Scriptures searching for all the facts...and yet they still missed Jesus when he came! Despite the fact that they were looking for the Messiah, they missed him even when he was born in their own backyards.

And listen, not a single one of those religious leaders who had told Herod about the prophecy bothered to accompany the Magi on their journey to find the child. It was only a journey of 4 or 5 miles to Bethlehem. But nobody went it seems, only the Magi, the spiritual outsiders. I mean talk about spiritual blindness and hardness of heart.

But that's what our sinful natures are like too. On Christmas Eve I talked about how Jesus is the light of the world. The Bible reveals the light of Jesus Christ to us that we might believe in him and be eternally delivered from the darkness of sin and death. Yet this is what the Bible also says: *"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed"* (John 3:19-20). The default condition of our hearts is darkness. By nature there is a part of us that wants to wander off and go our own way in life, that refuses to live our lives by faith in things yet unseen, that seeks fulfillment in things and people and pleasures that are not of God which cannot deliver on their false promises of hope. It is true for all of us that on our own we would plunge ourselves into spiritual ruin and destruction.

But God would not have it be so and by his grace alone we know that Light has indeed come into the world. This light of Christ still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. And through his Word and Sacraments God has turned on the light of faith in our hearts to believe his holy Word and fill our hearts with the hope that the Magi had—the hope of a Savior.

It's popular today to talk about one's spiritual journey. It's popular to hear people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. You can go to Barnes and Noble and you'll find a whole shelf on "spirituality." You can find a host of people on TV, an online parade of authors and bloggers who will happily offer to be your spiritual guide. But is it enough to just *be* on a spiritual journey so that it doesn't really even matter what spiritual journey you're on or who your guide is...so long as you find one that seems to fit for you?" Is that what hope is? Just a wish that you might embark on a journey that makes you feel a little better when you're feeling down, something to help you cope psychologically when life seems to be going in the wrong direction, a hope kind of like, "I hope the stock market doesn't tank this year?"

Friends, God offers a better hope than this! His hope isn't just a pious wish. His hope isn't just a coping mechanism. It's an anchor for your soul! God's Word says, *"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure"* (Hebrews 6:19). How many of you could use an anchor in your lives right now? You see Christianity isn't just a "turn-that-frown-upside-down" kind of pop culture, light and fluffy, feel good bunch of garbage. It's a message that no matter how dark it seems in our world because of sin, no matter how adrift and spiritually dead you might feel as your journey through life, no matter how bad it gets...God still loves you! And God who makes these great promises cannot possibly lie nor will he change his mind. And so even in the changing seasons of this life through all the ups and downs God's good goal even when you cannot see how is to guide you safely home on

your earthly journey to the harbor of heaven. Through his Word and Sacraments he offers hope as a firm and secure anchor for your soul. It's secure because God's own son Jesus secured this for us through the cross. Christianity, our faith, it's not just for the easy times when all is well and life is good. It was forged in the toughest of times after all, when sin and darkness reigned, through pain and suffering at the cross of Jesus Christ when all the forces of hell converged upon him in place of us all. So if your spiritual journey leads you to Christ guided by God's sacred word, then your faith will also find its anchor—firm and secure for your soul. That's what the Magi found.

⁹ *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.* ¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.* ¹¹ *On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

Now just keep in mind, this meeting likely took place a couple months after Jesus was born and not at the nativity scene on Christmas night. But that's kind of beside the point. The point is that the Magi are filled with great joy at meeting their King, aren't they? And they're not just happy that their hunch proved to be correct and now they could tell people back home, "Told you so." Now they're happy because they've found the one in whom all the hopes of all the years come together. We see it in the gifts that point to Jesus as the God-Man who came to die for our sins. Gold was a precious gift fit for a king. Incense was a gift fit for a priest. Myrrh was used to prepare a body for burial. So I think unlike the Jewish scholars in Jerusalem serving in king Herod's court, these Magi who were Gentiles understood that this child born the king of the Jews would not grow up to rule with a sword and murderous intent like Herod but with servant like love, even to the point of laying down his life as a ransom for the sins of the world so that people like you and me might have lasting hope.

The Magi followed the light of the star. They found their King. How can you know that you're on the right journey in your life and find true hope? I mean while the light of a special star was unique to the Magi God's Word in the Bible is a light that's available to every one of us.

Some people think the Bible is a book of rules telling you what you should and shouldn't do. And yes the Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best so that you can be blessed. But the Bible isn't mainly about you and what you should be doing. It's about God and what he has done for you. It's about how Jesus Christ, God's Son, loved us so much that he left his palace, his throne —everything—to win back his lost treasure. And you know what that lost treasure is? You and me.

Friends, God gives us his word to guide us like a light as we live as travelers here on earth until our journey ends in heaven. How can you know if you're on the right journey? Keep seeking Jesus in his word. Read, study it, talk about it with a group of Christian friends. And if this sounds like a brand new journey for you, I welcome you to join me in my Bible 101 class starting in two weeks. Start a new journey this year and navigate all the challenges of your life by the light of God's Word because it reveals the Light of the world. Amen.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).