

Following the Light

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Second Sunday of Christmas, (Jan. 1) 2023

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Advent is about getting ready for the coming of Christ. Christmas is God in Christ with us, which we celebrate for 12 days. And Epiphany (Jan. 6) and the Sundays which follow, show us who Christ is. The Gospel of John says, Christ is “the true light which enlightens everyone ...” (John 1:9). We are moving toward the season of light. And like the magi in our reading from Matthew, we are committed to following the light.

Chaucer called it “blissful light” and Milton prayed, “Hail, Holy Light.” English Puritan John Robinson said, “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.” Carlyle Marney, a legendary Baptist preacher and hero of mine, as a young man and young minister committed himself “to follow new light into any place as soon as I knew it to be new light.”

I think these magi were committed to following new light into any place as soon as they knew it to be new light. And this raises the question that I briefly want to pose for us: What might it mean for us to follow the Light? Since time is an issue this morning, I want to concisely share some reflections on what following the Light might mean.

- (1) Keep your eyes on the Light. Or in the words from the civil rights movement, keep your eyes on the prize. Be clear, be focused, and be single-minded. To put it differently, keep your life focused on Jesus and do not be

distracted by other things. Jesus says, “I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12). Center your life in Christ. Keep the main thing the main thing.

(2) Beware of confusing yourself with the Light. Sometimes (most of the time?) we’re still more in the dark than we realize. In Luke 11 Jesus says, “If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore, consider whether the light in you is not darkness” (Luke 11:34-35). In other words, be careful about being deceived or deceiving ourselves thinking that we know all the light when we’re really in the dark.

A few years ago, shortly after Austin Heights hosted the Roundtable Dialogue on Islamophobia, someone posted on our church Facebook page the following comment: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?’ 2 Corinthians 6.”

Now there’s plenty in the Bible and the New Testament saying much of the same. And I agree that the light and darkness have nothing to do with one another. The catch is this: We need to be careful assuming we are always in the Light and know the Light. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, as Paul says (Rom. 3:23). To be blunt, we are all sinners who do not see completely clearly; it is easy to convince ourselves that we are completely people of the Light. Jesus reminds us, beware that the light in us is really darkness. In other words, we are to practice humility, and no pun intended, we need to lighten up.

(3) It’s not enough to see the Light; we must be willing to follow the Light. My

guess is that there were many others who saw the Star and wondered what it was and furthermore, many of them were magi. At the same time, in Jerusalem were biblical scholars, scribes who also saw the Light and knew the Bible as well, but none got up and followed the Light. Sooner or later, you have to get up and follow. The great black preacher and New Testament scholar, William Watley said, “It isn’t the light that we see but the light that we follow that makes us wise.”

Related to this is the commitment to growth, an openness to change, and a willingness to follow the new light as soon as we determine that it is new light. A deep conviction of the radical church/baptist church is that there is further light – not because Christ has changed but because God by the Holy Spirit shows us things to see that our ancestors were previously blind to or that we have been blind to. To use old baptist language, we are committed to walking in the light with the hope of more light to come” (see Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 283). By the light of Christ, we’re able to see things in the Bible that we never saw before.

Therefore, we’re open to change and growth and learning. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr used to say, “We have notions of the Absolute, but we have no absolute notions.” We seek to be clear as possible about what is Absolute – God in Jesus Christ, and what is not – what we’re open to receiving new light about.

(4) To follow the Light takes help. Even though the magi were open to new light and were committed to following it, they still needed the interpretative help and insights of the scribes in Jerusalem. The magi could not find the infant Jesus by themselves, and they did not understand what the star meant on their own. It takes a community of learning and worship to follow the

Light of Jesus Christ. This is why we pray and read scripture in community, in an ongoing conversation of mutual trust and friendship.

At the same time, from the perspective of those biblical scholars in Jerusalem, here were some magi from Iraq and Iran or further points east, who knew something of the Light they didn't know. Sometimes, keeping our eyes on Jesus Christ, being humble, and being open to new Light means that we might catch some of the Light from completely unexpected sources.

Here in Bible Belt Christianity and here in America, and as hyper-individual Texans, we tend to think that we have all of the Light that we need, and we can figure it out for ourselves. But in this story from Matthew, we are told that there is more light out there than we realize. This star was shining on a lot of people and not everyone was a member of the Jerusalem Baptist Church. Some of them might have been Methodists ... or Muslims ... or Buddhists.

When we are secure in Christ, then we can relax. We do not need to be threatened by other ways of thinking and other ways of seeing, including from other religions. By the Light of Christ, we can discern together whether or not the Light we glean from others is truly new Light or not. We can be open to listening and learning and seeing something new.

It takes community to follow the Light. But notice the interplay between scripture and the Light. By seeing the Light and following the Light the magi know that the Christ has been born but they need Scripture to interpret where and what it all means. At the same time, the scribes know the Bible but knowing Bible verses does not lead them to worship Christ.

The world is full of “stars in the East” – events and experiences in nature

and in our personal lives that point us to the Light and mystery of God. And we need to be attentive and open to them. At the same time, without the defining and clarifying word of Scripture we can't recognize these holy moments of Light for what they are. Like the magi, we might know something holy has happened but without the revelation of God in Scripture we don't know where or how to worship. Like the magi, without Scripture we might miss the Christ-child by eight miles – which is the distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

(5) We are witnesses to the Light. But we are not in charge of the Light, we do not manage the Light, or force others to see the Light or try to out-argue over the Light. Our calling is to point to the Light. That's what a witness does. We point, not to ourselves, but to the Light. And the primary way we witness is the kind of lives we live. We want to live in such a way that cannot be otherwise explained except by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

(6) To follow the Light takes enormous risk. This story is clear that King Herod was threatened by the news of the birth of one called the King of Jews. Herod was afraid of losing his power and when Herod was not happy, no one was happy. He ordered his troops to go to Bethlehem and kill all the toddlers and babies 2 years of age and younger. If he could have caught the wise men, he would have killed them and the only reason the toddler Jesus and his parents escaped death was that Joseph was warned in a dream and told to flee to Egypt. To put it in the language of the headlines of today, Joseph and Mary and toddler Jesus were refugees or immigrants in a world of power-hungry politicians.

Connected to this let me say, may God have mercy on us all, for politicians

who use refugees and immigrants, dumping them in the middle of extremely hazardous cold weather, just to gain political power. The governor is using people, helpless people, for power. God will judge him! God will judge us all!

To follow the Light is risky and often confrontational. Those with power will be threatened by it. Those comfortable with the status-quo and the old way will not like it. There will be consequences. But to not follow the Light means to acquiesce to the darkness.

(7) And one other thing. The Light will change your life. You won't be the same. Our Gospel story says, the wise men returned to their own country another way. I wonder if that not only means they went home by another route, avoiding Herod. But I wonder if it also means they went home different from when they left.

I end with these words from two poets. T.S. Eliot famously said, "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time" ("Little Gidding") And Mary Oliver wrote, "Then I go back to town, to my own house, my own life, which has now become brighter and simpler, some-where I have never been before..." ("Six Recognitions of the Lord").

We don't know what happened to the Magi, but I think they arrived where they started and knew the place for the first time. They went home and saw everything brighter and simpler, as if they had never been there before.

May it be so for us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.