

**“Warning: Following Yonder Star will Change your Direction”**

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

January 3, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

**Hymns for Worship Video – January 3, 2021**

“As with gladness men of old” #172 in the Book of Praise

*Conrad Kocher / William Chatterton Dix*

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As with gladness men of old  
Did the guiding star behold  
As with joy they hailed its light  
Leading onward beaming bright  
So most gracious Lord may we  
Evermore be led to Thee

As their precious gifts they laid  
At Thy manger roughly made  
So may we with holy joy  
Pure and free from sin's alloy  
All our costliest treasures bring  
Christ to Thee our heav'nly King

In the heav'nly country bright  
Need they no created light  
Thou its light its joy its crown  
Thou its sun which goes not down  
There for ever may we sing  
Alleluias to our King

“What Star is this” #170 in the Book of Praise

*Charles Coffin / David Lantz III / George Ratcliffe Woodward / John Chandler / Michael Praetorius*

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What star is this with beams so bright  
More lively than the noonday light  
'Tis sent to announce a newborn King  
Glad tiding of our God to bring

'Til now fulfilled what God decreed  
From Jacob shall a star proceed  
And lo the Eastern sages stand  
To read in heav'n and Lord's command

O Jesus while the star of grace  
Compels us on to seek Your face  
Let not our idle heart refuse  
The guidance of Your light to use

To God the Father God the Son  
And Holy Spirit Three in One

May every tongue and nation raise  
An endless song of thankful praise

“We three kings” #173 in the Book of Praise

*John Henry Hopkins Jr.*

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We three kings of Orient are  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar  
Field and fountain moor and mountain  
Following yonder star

*Chorus*

O star of wonder star of night  
Star with royal beauty bright  
Westward leading still proceeding  
Guide us to Thy perfect light

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain  
Gold I bring to crown Him again  
King forever ceasing never  
Over us all to reign

*Chorus*

Frankincense to offer have I  
Incense owns a Deity nigh  
Prayer and praising voices raising  
Worship Him God on high

*Chorus*

Myrrh is mine its bitter perfume  
Breathes a life of gathering gloom  
Sorrowing sighing bleeding dying  
Sealed in the stone cold tomb

*Chorus*

Glorious now behold Him arise  
King and God and sacrifice  
Alleluia alleluia  
Peals through the earth and skies

*Chorus*

Closing Chorus: "Walk with the Lord"

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Walk with the Lord  
Go from this place  
filled with his everlasting grace  
Walk with the Lord  
Go where he leads  
blessed by his love and his peace  
Each day you live in all you do  
let the light of Christ be found in you  
Walk with the Lord  
Trust and obey  
Go now and serve him in faith  
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

**Scripture Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6**

**60** Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
<sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
<sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
<sup>6</sup> A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

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

<sup>6</sup> ‘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 my people Israel.’”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### **Meditation**

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

Several years ago, my congregation here at St. Columba in Belleville generously gave me the perpetual gift of the first Sunday in January as a day off after the busyness of the Advent and Christmas season. I have been so grateful for that Sunday off because it means I can rest my mind from sermon writing for a week, and it means I can spend a whole weekend relaxing with my husband. I have always truly appreciated it.

This year, however, things are somewhat different. With the sanctuary being closed until our region returns to the green “protect” level, we are continuing to provide online worship services, which means recording a few days ahead of time. In practical terms, that means I have every Sunday “off” as we worship at home! So, I have enjoyed putting today’s service together for this Epiphany Sunday, because it is the first time in a number of years that I have preached on the story of the Magi visiting wee Jesus and his mother.

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, the winter solstice included a special event. There was a coming together of Jupiter and Saturn that hasn’t happened in hundreds of years. The proximity of the two planets gave the effect of a remarkable star, and many were referring to it as the Christmas Star. Unfortunately due to cloud cover, we couldn’t see this extraordinary event in our area, but pictures have been released so we have an idea. What an amazing thing for us as we journeyed through Christmas week, especially this year when Christmas is more difficult for everyone. It’s as if God knew we needed to be reassured that he has been close to us throughout the past year of turmoil and crisis, and even though we could not be personally close with so many of the people we love as we welcomed the Christ Child, God remained with us. Scientists said the timing was

purely coincidence, but was it? Can God not make this kind of thing happen? God knew we needed some reassurance this year, so let's not dismiss the occurrence as merely coincidence.

My friend and colleague the Rev. David Berkers wrote this about the celestial event: "The wise men we read about in Matthew's gospel followed a star that led them to Jesus where they were able to give him the gifts they had brought and also to worship him. They were overjoyed when they saw the star and I can't help but think that God has allowed us to be able to see an amazing event like this 'Christmas Star' at a time when we really need to see it. If this had been what we think of as a 'normal' year we would have been okay with this happening. But I think that it is more significant for a world that needs something to remind them that the birth of Jesus our Saviour is still important and a source of joy."<sup>1</sup>

Thank you God for such a special gift.

As we read the text of the Magi following the star that led them to Jesus, we see all kinds of things within the story. There is curiosity, fear, determination, humility, reverence and warning. The star gazers see this unusual star in the sky and begin to follow it in their quest to discover its meaning. They take precious gifts with them for there is something special at the end of their journey, a king, the King of the Jews. This royalty must be appropriately recognized. Little did they know what King they would worship as they set out on their starlit journey. Little did they know their journey would take a different direction from that which they already knew and had planned.

Following the star would set them on a new path.

The Magi had a plan. Follow the star; visit Herod; arrive at their destination; return to Herod; head home having had a remarkable experience, that much more knowledgeable, that much wiser for their efforts. Ah, the best laid plans.

Craig Satterlee, scholar of preaching and liturgy and a prolific author, has reflected on the experience of the Magi, and our experience of their journey, with some rather interesting insights. He writes, "God is so determined to proclaim the 'good news of great joy for *all* the people' (Luke 2:10) that God reaches beyond fields in the region around Bethlehem to 'the East'... God reaches beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to Wise Ones at the top. God reaches beyond people scared witless by God's glory to those who observe the glorious star at its rising, and methodically, persistently, and sincerely follow it to a king. All along the way, God directs them, first by a star, then via a verse from Micah, and finally in their dreams."<sup>2</sup>

So, these elite of society do what they do, they follow a new star. But, as Satterlee asserts, these are not the normal people one would have expected to be a part of the Christmas story. They were likely practitioners and even leaders within another religious belief system, one that focused on the highly regarded science of astrology. Satterlee continues, "So these Wise Ones from the East were scientists and practiced other religions, and God used their faith and knowledge to bring them to the Christ. More ironic, God used scientists who practiced other

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. David Berkers, Minister at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Gananoque ON. "Words of Comfort" for December 22, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12>. Author: Craig A. Satterlee.

religions to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people in on the news that their Messiah had been born.”<sup>3</sup>

The point is, God reaches far beyond where the limitations of our human thinking take us to embrace all people, and to spread the Gospel message to all people. Where we are terribly limited, there is no limit to God’s embrace. There is no limit to God’s forgiveness. There is no limit to God’s grace, no conditions placed on God’s love, no boundary to the length and breadth of God’s reach.

My physical reach is very limited – I have to ask my son to get things down or put things back on high shelves. His reach is considerably further than mine, but there is still a maximum to how far his fingertips can go.

The reach of my understanding is limited. I have to ask questions, consult scholars, turn to manuals, request help for things I don’t know about. I have to trust others to know what they are doing because they are strong in areas in which I am not. And the people to whom I turn also have to turn to others that are strong in areas in which they are not. And so on. Everyone has limits.

Except God.

God’s reach, God’s understanding, God’s knowledge, God’s power, is unlimited. It has no boundaries.

God’s ability to embrace even those who seem furthest away from him is unlimited.

God’s ability to embrace people is often through those who seem the least likely to be successful.

Turning back to Satterlee’s work for a moment, this writer is crystal clear about the unlimitedness, and our lack of understanding of God’s ways, as he reflects on the Christmas and Epiphany stories and how our loving Creator reached and reached and reached out to those needing to be embraced. “God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God’s own people through visitors from the East. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God’s reach, God’s embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God’s embrace.”<sup>4</sup>

*In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God’s embrace. In Christ Jesus...*

Satterlee continues, “God’s radical grace is wondrously frightening. I experience a bit of a shudder as I think of the implications of portraying the Magi as scientists who practiced another religion, because to do so pushes me to expand my understanding of both the ways God reaches out to people to announce good news in and through Christ and what it means for individuals to have faith and for gatherings of the faithful to be church.”<sup>5</sup>

The reality is, the Magi didn’t come to faith in Christ through the traditional rituals of a faith community. They came by quite a different way. They followed when God beckoned,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

irresistibly drawn to this new thing they were seeing in the sky. God spoke to them quite outside of sermons and liturgies and practiced expressions of belief. This isn't to say the church is not a means by which God embraces people, quite the opposite. God expands the family of the faith community through whatever means are going to set people on a different path – the path of faith in Christ Jesus. The gathered people grows as God works to change people's direction in unexpected and unlimited ways.

God did not come into the world as it had been expected.

God did not live in the world as it had been expected.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to embrace it.

God did not make the Messiah victorious in the way it had been expected.

Instead, God did all these things in the way it had to be, the way it would be successful – in God's way; in God's time.

Unexpected, oh yes. Ineffective, oh no.

God's way is always the most effective way, but we have to remember God's way is often something we don't see coming. It is surprising, amazing, and can be wonderfully mysterious.

God speaks in and through the community of faith. God speaks in and through his servants. God also often speaks in and through some unlikely means.

He spoke through an angel;

A baby;

Shepherds;

Magi;

Dreams.

And God embraced people that seemed furthest from him by drawing them closer to him. By following yonder star, their direction was changed. By worshipping Jesus, their direction was changed. By listening to God speak, their direction was changed.

God began to resolve the conflict between what we expect and what God does by the birth of an infant Messiah. That infant grew to preach and teach a new way of listening to God, a new way of understanding, a new way of following. That teacher became the Saviour. God resolved the final conflict when Jesus was lifted on the cross and raised from the dead. That resolution laid a new direction before his people, and set them, set us, on a more gracious, more merciful path that brings us closer and closer to our Lord.

God's embrace has no limit... maybe it should come with a warning label.

*Warning: following yonder star may change your direction.*

Embrace it, as you are embraced by the limitless love and faithfulness of God, through Christ Jesus. Amen.