

"The Star of Christmas"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
Christmas Eve Sermon
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December 24, 2017
(Mt. 2:1-12)

Introduction.

One of the things I have enjoyed a great deal since moving to Winston-Salem five years ago is learning about all the Moravian history and the traditions in this part of the world. I love going to Old Salem, especially at Christmas, and I love showing friends and family visiting our city the old community which was founded in the 18th century. And with Christmas upon us, I decided to make a study to learn more about the Moravian star that is so prevalent in our city. Isn't it beautiful hanging here in the sanctuary?

I did a little research and discovered that the first Moravian star is believed to have originated in the 1830s at the Moravian Boys School in Niesky, Germany. Historians believe it was probably a geometry project for the students. (Can you imagine being in that class? It must have been a bear of a project to figure out!) It wasn't long before Moravian communities all over the world began to adopt this multi-pointed star as a symbol of Advent, and it became a part of Moravian celebrations all over the world.

Since Winston-Salem began as a Moravian settlement in 1766, it's not surprising to see that the star became a part of the history in our city, too, and I read where the 31-foot tall Moravian star that sits on top of the Wake Forest Medical Center on Business 40 is one of the tallest in the world.

Shortly after I moved here five years ago with my late wife Lorie, that first Christmas friends gave us the wonderful gift of a Moravian star, and I have proudly hung in the portico of the entrance to my home each year. But the best part about the gift of this star is that my friend put it together for us! I'm told the geometric design makes it difficult to put all the pieces together. Many a person has had their patience and their sanctification pushed to the limit by a Moravian star!

The Moravian Star is an important part of Winston-Salem's celebration of the holidays, but a star was also a crucial part of the celebration of that first Christmas when Jesus was born. This evening as we gather together on Christmas Eve, I want you to notice that the star the Magi saw in the book of Matthew was both a guiding star, and it was a star that brought joy.

I. The Guiding Star of Christmas.

"After Jesus had been born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who have been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him'" (Mt. 2:1,2).

A camel caravan arrived in Jerusalem, and the visitors began to ask questions. The Magi were people who studied the stars, and they were widely considered wise men in the ancient world because of their ability to discern the meaning of the movements of the stars. However, they were regarded by the Jews as pagan idolaters, which makes their invitation to the birthday party of Jesus all the more intriguing. It seems that Matthew the evangelist delights in telling us of their inclusion in the story of Christmas because it proclaimed the truth that the good news of God's love is for everyone, even those who are far away from the faith.

We don't know exactly what brilliant star these ancient Magi saw, and many suggestions have been made over the years. For example, some scientists point out that around 11 BC Haley's comet was visible shooting across the sky. Also, about 6 BC there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. There is an astronomer at Rutgers University who wrote a book arguing that this was the star of Christmas. Finally, in the years of 5 to 2 BC there was an astronomical phenomenon where a star rose at sunrise and shown with extraordinary brilliance throughout the day. We don't know what star the Magi saw, but we do know that it must have been out of the ordinary to have caught their attention. What is important to notice about this star is that it was used by God to guide these Magi to the place where Jesus was born.

All of us need guidance in life, don't we, whether it's during Christmas or any other time of the year? I talked to a couple of college graduates recently who have completed their degrees. They're eager to find guidance for what they're supposed to do next, and I sensed they'd appreciate some divine help to figure it all out!

Sometimes you and I can find ourselves lost and confused over which way to turn. There are even times when we wander away from God, and we wonder how in the world we got to where we are. A few years ago, I was on a plane to Seattle, and in the seat next to me was a young man named Alex. He saw me reading Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, and he said to me, "That's a story in the Bible, isn't it?"

I answered, "Yes it is. Do you know it?"

That began a profound conversation in which he related to me his story. Alex was born in the Philippines, but his family moved to California when he was young. After he grew up he moved to Tacoma, Washington, where he now worked at the SeaTac airport. He was raised Catholic, but he had

a "born again" experience as a young man, although he wandered from his faith some time ago.

Alex was on the plane that day after visiting his girlfriend in Juarez, Mexico, a woman he had known for 13 years. However, the vacation was cut short after a bitter argument, and they broke off the relationship for good. He was so disillusioned when I talked to him. He felt so alone. Alex said to me, "I feel like the young man in that story of Jesus. I have wandered very far from home, and I know I need to get back."

Are you like Alex? Do you find yourself here this evening feeling lost and not sure where to turn? The star of Christmas can point you to Christ, just as the star led the Magi to the place where Jesus was born. The Lord wants to lead you to Himself so you can find your way and experience His joy. That's the second thing I want to talk about tonight.

II. The Joyful Star of Christmas

"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming into the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh" (Mt. 2:10,11).

The text tells us that at the sight of the star, they were overjoyed. Why were these Magi so full of joy? Perhaps it was because they saw the familiar star again, and they were grateful for its guidance. Or maybe it was because they sensed that they were nearing the end of their journey. I think the real reason they were full of joy was because of the baby they encountered that first Christmas. They rejoiced when the star stood still over the place where the child was, and He represented the goal of their search.

There's a joy that only Jesus can bring us at Christmas or any other time of the year. And this joy is different from the kind of joy that comes from opening a present, or seeing family and friends, or sharing a good meal with loved ones, as wonderful as those experiences can be. The joy I'm talking about is a joy that can only come from God Himself, and it's rooted in worshipping the Lord, as the Magi did.

C.S. Lewis wrote a book about his search for God in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. It recounts his spiritual journey which led him from the Christianity of his youth into atheism, and then, back to faith in Christ again. Lewis suggests that all of us are looking for joy in our lives, which he says is different from happiness. Happiness is like the moon, waxing and waning, coming and going. Joy is like the sun, always shining even when night falls or clouds cover it up. Happiness is a kiss; joy is a golden wedding anniversary.

Happiness is born in the mind; joy is born in the heart. Happiness comes from humans; joy comes from God. Happiness is exchanging Christmas gifts; joy is an awareness of what Christmas is all about.

The star of Christmas brought joy to the Magi, because they bowed down to worship the One who had been born king of the Jews. When I was in the Holy Land several years ago, I visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. There's a door that leads into the courtyard of the church, and you have to bend down to go through it. Walking down some stairs, I found my way to the cave where supposedly Jesus was born, and there imbedded in the floor is a silver star marking the place of our Lord's birth. To see it closely, you have to bend over and nearly get on your knees. The Magi learned it's only on your knees that you can truly experience the joy of Christmas.

The Magi traveled a long way, and they went forward by faith in search of the One whose star they had seen. I suspect that there were times when they wondered if they were fools out on a wild goose chase. But it was in the context of that long and difficult journey, in the midst of that search, that God brought them joy. And the key to their joy was Jesus.

Are you sad this Christmas? Has all the craziness of the season robbed you of your joy this year? Has something happened in your life that has broken your heart or made you cry? Then push past the presents, push past the disappointments and the heartache, and gaze into the face of the Babe in the manger. He can bring you joy like nothing and no one else in all this world.

Tomorrow I will fly to Colorado to see two of my children and two of my grandchildren, including my grandson Lleyton who was here with his father earlier this month for the Angel Breakfast. I can't wait to see them all. I remember when Lleyton was born, and holding him as a baby in my arms awakened in me a new kind of joy. I could stare into his face for hours, and I never got tired of looking at him. It didn't even bother me if he spit up on my shirt and made a mess. My grandchildren have brought so much joy to our family.

Having grandchildren has given me a new appreciation for the miracle of the incarnation. As Philip Yancey writes, "The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind, nor a devouring fire. Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrank down, down, down, so small as to become an ovum, a single fertilized egg barely visible to the naked eye, an egg that would divide and re-divide until the fetus took shape, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous teenager....The God who roared, who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard, this God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food or control his bladder, who depended on a teenager for shelter, food, and love."¹

This is the One the Magi came to worship, and it brought them joy. They realized it was a heavenly visitation, and they didn't want to miss it. Don't miss Jesus this Christmas! He is Immanuel, God with us. And He can bring you joy.

Conclusion.

As we close this evening, I want to mention one final observation from this passage. It has to do with the Magi returning home by another way. The text tells us that after they came to Jesus and worshipped Him by presenting gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they returned home by another way because the Lord warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. They came to Jesus because they had seen a star and it guided them there, but they returned another way because now they had a relationship with God and the Lord revealed to them what they were supposed to do. They came after hearing about the Messiah, but now they left knowing the Messiah themselves having seen Him with their own eyes and worshipping Him in the gifts they offered.

This Christmas do you need to return by another way, too, just like the Magi? You've come to this sanctuary heading in one direction in your life, but God has been speaking to you and you need to leave a different way. Maybe it's at work, or in your relationships with your family. Maybe it's at school, or with a friend, or a neighbor, or your boyfriend. You've been going down one path, and the Lord wants you to make a change. Are you willing to do what God tells you to do and go where He tells you to go? What is God's Spirit saying to you? How is He warning you? In what ways does the Lord want you to return by another way this evening? Have you only heard about the Messiah, or do you really know Him yourself?

There is no better time than Christmas to make a change in your life and begin the New Year going in a new direction. After encountering Jesus this Christmas, be open to the leading of God's Holy Spirit and go in the way He wants you to go in 2018. May this next year be the best ever for you and your family. Merry Christmas, everyone!

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 36.