

## “Follow the Leader”

First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
January 6, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14**

**New Testament Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12**

Pondering scripture like the passage we just heard, writer Dorothy Day observed the following:<sup>1</sup> “In Christ’s life there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ.

The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand’s breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ. Even the gifts the wise men brought have in themselves an obscure ... atonement for what would follow later in this Child’s life. For they brought gold, the king’s emblem, to make up for the crown of thorns that he would wear; they offered incense, the symbol of praise, to make up for the mockery and the spitting; they gave him myrrh, to heal and soothe, and he was wounded from head to foot and no one bathed his wounds. The women at the foot of the cross did it too, making up for the crowd who stood by and sneered.”

Today we begin a sermon series titled “Jesus – The Man; the Miracle Worker.” Over the next few weeks, we will explore the first of Jesus’ many miracles, the path he walked in fulfilling his destiny, and what we can learn from it in rediscovering and fulfilling our calling in life. Let this sermon be an introduction and preparation for what’s to follow, so that we might be blessed through the living word of God in the weeks ahead.

The wise men, in discovering and fulfilling their calling as central figures in the life of Jesus, traveled a certain path, a path that foreshadows the pathway Jesus will walk from newborn babe to transformational leader to blessed Savior.

After King Herod rose to power in Judea, Matthew tells us about these “wise men from the East (who) came to Jerusalem asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’ They had observed his star at its rising, and came to pay him homage, meaning respect and reverence.

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<sup>1</sup> “*By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*,” (Knopf, 1983), p. 96.

So, what did it take for them to embark on this journey of discovery? After all, going to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish culture, was quite a stretch for three Eastern mystics. Their whole lives had been devoted to discerning the wisdom of the ages through the study of Eastern traditions.

In Jerusalem, they were Gentiles, foreigners, outsiders unaccustomed to the ways of Jewish life, Roman government, Temple practices. What does it take to leave everything you know in search of something new and wonderful? That will be the focus of next week's sermon, which is titled "Embracing New Ways." We will see that not only did the wise men have to embrace new ways, but so will Jesus and the society he enters as a young man. Nothing ever stays the same. The next new thing is always right around the corner. How we deal with that will be our focus next week.

But let's back up for a moment today. How did the wise men know where to look for Jesus? Anyone? You know the story? What led them to Jesus? A star. That's right. They followed a star. Now, how many of you have ever followed a star? And I don't mean a movie star on Twitter or Instagram. It's kind of ridiculous, to follow an actual star in the sky, isn't it? I mean, you pack up all your possessions, and leaving behind your home and family, you trek across the countryside following some twinkling light in the sky. Nobody's ever done that in our day and age. But that's sometimes what it takes – trying new ways to get from "a" to "b" – in order to discover and reach your true destination, what God really desires for you.

I mean the wise men not only followed a star, they followed the Hebrew scriptures completely foreign to them. Matthew tells us that Herod called together all the chief priests and scribes and "inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born." "They told him, 'In Bethlehēm of Judea..."

So, off the wisemen go to Bethlehēm based at least in part on these strange writings of the Hebrew people – "Em-bracing new ways." The third sermon in our four-part series, the one on Jan. 20, is titled "Embracing the Unexpected." We will look at how Jesus approached the unexpected, when he and the disciples attended a wedding, the wedding at Cana, where he worked his first miracle? We will look at that, and in doing so, we'll look at how our expectations can limit us – *or* free us – when it comes to what's possible in life.

Just look at the wise men all along, they were met with the unexpected. Even at the end of their quest – after finding Jesus, paying homage and giving gifts – there

comes the unexpected. Matthew tells us they don't go back the way they came, saying "...they left for their own country by another road."

This is because as they came closer to Jesus, they receive new information, as if in a dream, directing them to follow a different path. They didn't know it setting out, but their plans changed, their destiny changed, they changed.- "Embracing the Unexpected."

Our final sermon in the series is titled "Embracing Your True Self." On the last Sunday of the series, on Jan. 27, our sermon will follow Jesus to a turning point in his ministry, in his identity.

Nobody is stagnant in their identity. We all grow and change over the years. The problem is, the more years under your belt, the harder it can be to grow and change, regardless of what amazing, miraculous things might be possible, for you and through you.

By joining us in following the pathway of Jesus from babe to miracle worker to Savior of the world, you will gain insights, inspiration, courage and strength to move into new spaces in life, to blossom in new ways, to become who God would have you be in your next stage of life.

Does that frighten you? It might. Following a new path can be frightening. But I've got a secret for you. Every path is a new path. We are always following someone or something somewhere. Even when we think we're done – we're staying put – that's a pathway you're choosing to follow – and perhaps it's a dead-end pathway. Only you know for sure if something new is out there ahead of you. I hope there is; for all of us.

Over the next week, I'd like you to think of a project or decision you are struggling with. What's the next step? What's keeping you from taking that step? Think about it. What has God called you to do that suddenly seems to be falling apart? What naysaying comments are you hearing, either from others or in your own thoughts?

As we've seen today, we are always following something or someone in a grand game of Follow the Leader. Who or what is the Leader for you in your life? What has brought you where you are and who or what can take you the next little way toward discovering or reaffirming your calling in life?

Ponder these questions. Jot some things down, and bring those thoughts and feelings with you the next few weeks – along with some friend and family, bring them, too (wouldn't that be great?) – as we discovery together how best to follow the true and only leader worth following, Jesus – the Man; the Miracle Worker. Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

The holiday is over but the work of Christmas is just beginning. Guide us, loving God, as we follow in the footsteps of the one whose birth we celebrate.

Grant us the grace to order our lives so that others might know that we have knelt in Bethlehem and worshiped the newborn king.

As the light from the star guided the wise men of old, O God, so might your love shine from within us to encircle and embrace all those who have lost their way.

We ask your blessing and healing touch on all those struggling with illness or disease, and your comfort for any suffering at this time.

On the threshold of this new year, O God, let us remember to follow the star instead of the crowd. And let us affirm in prayer who that star is, as together we pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**