



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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## Hitch Your Wagon to a Star

Matthew 2:1-12 & Isaiah 60:1-6

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 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. (Is. 60:1-6 RSV)

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: 6 And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel." 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; 8 and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; 11 and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Mt. 2:1-12 RSV)

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Everyone knows the story of the three kings from the Orient who visited the baby Jesus. Longfellow even gave the kings names: Melchoir, Casper, and Balthasar. Everyone knows about the guiding star and about the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh the kings set before the baby Jesus.

Did you know there is not a shred of evidence the wise men were kings...nor that there were three of them...nor that they were wise?<sup>1</sup> We don't know who they were - where they came from - or how many of them there were. We don't know how long it

took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got there. Scholars insist he most certainly was not a baby or even a toddler.<sup>2</sup>

Strange how so much has been made of this story about which we really know so little. Be that as it may, I find it is best to apply ourselves to this or any given text with an eye of expectancy for what God may do through it even unto us.

In that vein, let's consider the story of the Magi.<sup>3</sup>

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When we pick up the text, the Christ child is born and the star over his cradle shines brightly. In a faraway land astrologers make a startling discovery. This new star - a star never before seen - burns brightly in the western sky. Is it the conjunction of Mars, Saturn, and Jupiter? Is it a super nova? Is it a star they have somehow overlooked all these years?

Whatever...the text wants us to conclude that the Magi conclude the star must mean a king is come. So they gather precious gifts, throw together a caravan and set off at nightfall to find the king whose crown is this star.

Poet T. S. Eliot suggests the wise men travel at night because the daylight hours are filled with too many distractions: hostile cities, unfriendly towns, dirty villages, merchants charging high prices...the usual stuff. Writes Eliot as if one of those wise men, "at the end we prefer to travel all night, sleeping in snatches, with the voices singing in our ears, saying this is all folly."<sup>4</sup>

Folly...well, maybe so! The Magi don't know where they are going, don't know who or what it is they will find. Like a dog that finally catches a car it's been pursuing, the Magi don't know what they will do if they actually find this Jewish Messiah. They don't even know if there is anything beneath this new star. Perhaps it is akin to the imagination necessary to follow the rainbow to the pot of gold, or like dauntless Don Quixote tilting after windmills. This star may only lead to disappointment and frustration...and then again, it may lead to their heart's deepest longing. Reckless, precarious, irresponsible, yet hopeful, they go...

I don't know about you - but I find myself identifying with those wise men in so many ways...the day I was married, for example. By the promise Deb and I made we reached into an unpredictable future and made one thing predictable: we would be there for each other when being there may cost us more than we could imagine. By our promise we stretched ourselves out into circumstances beyond our knowledge or control and decided we would control at least one thing: we would be there for each other no matter what the circumstances turn out to be.

Now, believe me, as Deb and I set out on our journey together our marriage promise was absolutely reckless. We didn't have the foggiest notion what it would mean in years to come...but we have found out. Again and again that promise has been tested... and we give thanks for the commitment that impelled us to exchange the promise.

G. K. Chesterton once said, "The person who makes a promise makes an appointment with himself at some distant time and place and he gives up his freedom in order to keep that appointment."

With eyes focused upon the bright star, the Magi commit themselves to their journey. Like all travelers their resolve will be tested. At first there is the excitement of

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being all caught up in the mystery of the search. But as the miles slowly clip by and the objective remains afar off, doubts and some regrets settle in. "Is this trip foolish? Wasn't life fine and dandy at home? Surely this uncertain quest is not worth all the trouble."

I suspect you have had similar thoughts at one time or other because we are all on a journey. You and I are pilgrims along life's narrow road traveling from some place into the unknown. Sometimes we revel in the journey, gladly taking in everything along the way. But other times we lament we cannot slow the clocks endless revolutions and become anchored in something safe and secure. And for a season circumstances may allow us to pretend we can sit still and be safe. But such seasons are short and soon we are reminded we are all restless, vulnerable sojourners moving along a road headed somewhere, towards something. Where are we headed? What leads us? What guides us? Anything? Nothing?

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"Hitch your wagon to a star", said Ralph Waldo Emerson over a century ago. It was his way of telling his generation everyone needs ideals, high standards, and commanding purposes in order to make the most out of life.<sup>5</sup>

Not bad advice - for, Lord knows, we flounder for direction. Whether we realize it or not, we long to commit our lives to someone or something (to an ideal, maybe) that can give our lives purpose and meaning, which can then furnish us direction. There are so many attractive stars. To which star do we hitch our wagon?

An especially thoughtful teenage girl once said, "I am having a hard time with the idea of becoming an adult. What I see of adulthood confuses me. The peculiar thing is adults say young people are self-centered. From what I can tell, adults are the ones who think only of themselves. As I look around at the way so many adults behave, right and wrong seem to be only a matter of opinion and convenience. And helping others seems to be the priority of very few. Do all adults glibly weasel out of every moral challenge? Is there no one who can serve as a model for me as I grow into adulthood?"

Young people, indeed all people, want to believe in something and in someone. But so few people are worthy of trust. Too many people mishandle and violate the trust we unreservedly and ill-advisedly confer upon them.

Hitch your wagon to a star. Which star? A Hollywood star...a Rock & Roll star...an athletic star...a political star. These stars seduce us with their majestic glow. But when we take a good look, are not most stars deceptive? Do not most stars leave us a tad flat, unfulfilled, and uninspired? Is there not a truly brilliant star to guide us?

In the book of Revelation Jesus is portrayed saying, "I am the root and offspring of David, the **bright morning star**".<sup>6</sup> If we are going to hitch our wagon to any star, should it not be to Jesus, the promised star of God!

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Now, what may this mean for us? What may it mean to hitch our wagon to Jesus?

The wise men endured much and finally came to the place where a boy named Jesus was busy growing to a man. They beheld the youngster, gave him their peculiar gifts, and then left to return to their homes by another way.

You and I and those who make occasional inquiry wonder...were those wise men better, fuller, richer for the whole experience? Did they have a firmer grip on how best to

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live their lives? Didn't they leave and once again endure the trials of being travelers, more daily battles, more struggles, more frustrations, and infrequent successes? And once they experienced Jesus, could they ever really go "home" again? What about all this encourages us or our teenage girl to let Jesus be the star to guide us?

Well, we know Jesus is our worthy star as we let him lead us - as we let the principles and truths he stood for fill us with purpose and direction. By his guidance we discover what the Magi discovered...that our lives find meaning *in the midst of* the arduous journey, where we least expect it. With our gaze set upon him, we become more and more sure of who we are truly called to be. And we become increasingly certain that when we reach the place where the star stands still, we will find "peace." It is this certainty that gives us courage and hope to continue to follow, despite the pitfalls along the way.

So, what Christ does to us personally, individually is part of the answer we give to our teenage girl and others trying to decide which star to follow. The other part of the answer rests with you and me - and the influence of our witness upon others.

Inquirers look to you and ask: do you honor your commitments - do you keep the many promises you make throughout your life - do you tenderly and lovingly handle the trust others bestow upon you - do you know what it means to forgive and ask forgiveness - do you seek to treat all people with respect - do others see Christ through you?

In the days ahead as we are being tempted by the light of many deceptive stars, let us only give ourselves to the true star that illuminates the darkness of our world - the star that will never fail us.<sup>7</sup> Amen.



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## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart suggests to call the Magi "wise and learned men," is flagrantly nonsensical. See: <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/a-reply-to-n-t-wright>. Further on Hart and his new book, The New Testament: A Translation, from the December 23, 2018 *New Yorker* podcast of the "Radio Hour."

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara B. 1999. Home By Another Way. Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 28.

<sup>3</sup> Hart, David B. 2017. The New Testament: A Translation. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2. The Greek word is μάγοι – which means "magicians" [men of the Zoroastrian priestly cast of the Persians and Medes, largely associated in the Hellenistic mind with oneiromancy (the practice of predicting the future through interpretation of dreams) and astrology]...but a word that never merely means "wise" or "learned" men.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, T. S. 1971. "Journey of the Magi", in The Complete Poems and Plays. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 68.

<sup>5</sup> MacLennan, D. A. 1968. Sermons from Thanksgiving to Easter. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 57.

<sup>6</sup> See Revelation 22:16.

<sup>7</sup> See John 1:5.