

January 4, 2015

“Shine a Light”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"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."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

You may not know that in the days before radar and modern means of communication, the U.S. Lighthouse Service, in addition to maintaining and building lighthouses and other aids to navigation along our waterways, operated an Airways Division. This Airways division built towers that helped guide the early mail plane pilots across the country and also maintained the lights on the early landing strips that we now call airports. One such light was installed atop the Los Angeles City Hall in 1928 and turned on for the first time by the President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge. It could be seen as far east as Pomona and as far west as Santa Monica.

How one came to be here is a great story. It seems that after Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic in 1927, he received more gifts than he knew what to do with. When Los Angeles wanted to give him a gift, the aviator suggested instead to civic leaders that they contribute to the advancement of aviation rather than give him more presents.

The city decided to place the 1,000-watt light on the new City Hall to help pilots identify Los Angeles and also mark the 27-story building as a potential hazard to them. It came to be known as the Lindbergh Beacon.

The light was dark during most of World War II for fear that might aid Japanese pilots in finding their way here. Having stayed dark, it was turned off and taken down in 1947. The light sat for a time in the basement of City Hall and then was on display at the Tom Bradley International Terminal at Los Angeles International Airport.

When a refurbishment of City Hall was completed in 2001, the Lindbergh beacon was put back on top, to shine on special occasions. This year, it was lighted again a few nights before Christmas. The beacon will remain on through January 5th to mark the 12 days of Christmas "and to signify that L.A. is a beacon of tolerance of the world's peoples, cultures and faiths," Mayor Garcetti announced.

So you've got a couple more nights to get out and see it. I guess it's quite a sight and certainly adds a contemporary twist to the ancient story of that great star that guided the Three Wise Men from lands far off to the stable in Bethlehem.

In the church, this is called the Epiphany, a name that means "disclosure," "manifestation," "unveiling." It falls on the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6th and so we observe it on the closest Sunday as the day on which the light shines so that all can see the divine nature of the newborn Christ. We might say that this is the day our Lindbergh Light shines for the world to see.

So even if you're not a pilot or a Magi with a very hearty camel to help you follow your star, Epiphany is a good time to ask yourself: what star am I following? What light is guiding my life? As you're no doubt making other resolutions to get this new year off to a good start, ask yourself about your spiritual health, too.

Because, you know, it's really hard to say what this new year is going to bring, for us, for our world. Like you, perhaps, I've been reading what the pundits are predicting in the realms of politics, culture, the economy, and so forth. Actually, the stories I enjoy most this time of year are from those writers honest enough to look back to what they predicted a year ago and assess how they did. Most are eating humble pie. They know, as Yogi Berra so aptly put it: "Prediction is difficult—especially about the future."

So we know we'll be tested. We know we'll face things we cannot foresee or plan for. We know this new year will be full of challenges and opportunities and adventures, big and small. How do we saddle up our camels, so to speak? How do we get ourselves ready, spiritually speaking? What can we learn from the Wise Men? How do we know what light to follow?

Study. These guys were deeply immersed in their own sacred texts, their Scriptures. They mined them for all they could learn about God and about what God wants for this world and for our lives. So in addition to what bits you glean here on Sunday morning, set aside some time to read and study the Bible and make its stories your own.

Pay attention. The Wise Men were not only scholars of Scripture, they were paying attention to the world around them. They could read the signs of the times in addition to the pages of their books. So, don't bury your head in the sand. Look around. Try to figure out what's happening in our community, in our nation, in our world. And then test that against what God's love and justice demands.

Third: get moving. Get out there. If, for example, you're concerned about our schools and kids, talk to a teacher or two. We've got a bunch right here. Health care? Talk to a doctor or nurse. Test out your ideas and then support the people on the front lines who are investing heart and soul in making a difference.

Fourth: give. Give of yourself and your treasures. The Magi brought gold, frankincense and myrrh, precious gifts. With whatever you have been blessed, invest in the things that matter most. Support the mission of God.

Fifth: be filled with gratitude. When the kings arrived at the manger, they knelt down and paid homage to the newborn king. Let God's gift of love change everything about *how* you live, and how you give thanks, and how you keep it all in perspective.

Finally: stay flexible. Be prepared for the unexpected. King Herod tried to trick the Magi into giving up the whereabouts of the Babe. They saw through it and planned their return trip by a different route. Stay focused on the true light, the light that is even now coming into the world as John's Gospel puts it, that you can't be drawn off course by false gods or the whims of the moment. Know which light you follow and keep your focus there. "Star of wonder, star of light, guide us to thy perfect light."

As Eberhard Arnold has written: "the little stable at Bethlehem was the place where the love of God broke through to humankind. The wise men out of the East followed the star and discovered ...the place where God's love had come down. That is the most important thing for each of us: to discover in our own time and hour the place where God's love has broken through, and then to follow the star that has risen for us – and to remain true to the light that has fallen into our hearts."

As you prepare to come forward now to receive the sacrament of new life, think back over the New Year's resolutions you've thought about or made in this last week. This morning, add one about following God's star, and ask for the courage to go where it might take you. Add one about letting that light shine in this world in a way that will make a real difference for you and for others. And add to your 2015 "To Do" list, a daily prayer to let God's light guide your every thought and action, that we may live without fear into the glorious future of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, even our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Notes:

Jeff Gottlieb. [LA Times](#), Dec. 24, 2014.

William V. Arnold in [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1](#). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Eberhard Arnold: Inner Words for Every Day of the Year.

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