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The focus of Advent for our congregation this year is the star. Right there above the manger. A Moravian star. The result of a geometry lesson in a Moravian school in Niesky, Germany, ca. 1830. The original Moravian star had 110 points. Certainly demonstrates the explosive dynamic of suns in solar systems light years away from us, whose raging bursts of energy appear as mere twinkles in our dark night sky.

Stars are important at various places in the Bible. They are named as part of God's original creation. God's promise to Abram is that his descendants will be as many as the stars. An ancient prophecy by Balaam in Numbers 24:17 used the word "star" to talk about the one who would deliver God's people: "*A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth [the enemies of Israel].*" That may refer to King David, but it was also understood to foretell the coming of the Messiah – a star will come! 2 Peter and John's Revelation both call the Messiah the bright Morning Star, who will bring about the dawning of a new Day. Now that's a star to be watching for!

Just remember that there is a difference between watching and worshipping. Part of the Baal worship, which the prophets of the Bible railed against, involved bowing down to the constellations and to the starry host. They believed the stars could control their lives. Even today it is amazing how many people allow their lives to be shaped by horoscope forecasts, forgetting how Isaiah prophesied against Babylon, "*Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you. Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame*" (Isaiah 47:13-14). Isaiah clearly warns us: do not trust in those who say your fate is determined by the stars.

So it is rather amazing that the Gospel of Matthew lifts up star-gazers as key people in honoring the new-born Messiah Jesus. "*Magi from the east*" come, seeking for a new king, because they "*saw his star in the east.*" "*Magi*" is the Greek word for astrologers, people who "read" the relationships of the stars in the skies as a way of trying to understand what is going on in the world. To their credit, these Magi do not use their wizardry to try to control people. Instead, they respond to a "*star in the*

*east*” – which they believe means a new king is born – they respond by going to find him so that they might worship him. That’s different from the astrologers of the Old Testament and of our modern world, who put their trust in their secret knowledge ... these Magi put their trust in the One who is born to be King of the Jews.

The King James Version translates “Magoi” as “wise men” in the story of Jesus’ birth. When we get to Acts 13, however, where Peter and John are accosted by a “magos” – singular form of “magoi” – the word is understood as “sorcerer.” When the star gazer honors God, he is a wise man; when he tries to act like a god, he is a sorcerer.

The Magi who followed the star to find the child Jesus were wise astrologers, perhaps Zoroastrian priests. They were not kings. And we don’t know how many there were. The Bible doesn’t say. Perhaps because three gifts are named, people over the years have thought there were three Magi. But notice that the Bible does not specify. Because Nativity sets always have three, it’s hard to dispel the notion from our minds. Including the idea that the Magi arrived at the stable to present their gifts. The Magi did *not* arrive at the manger. We put them up there on our mantel, because we want to pull in every detail from each of the Gospels. But note what the Bible really says – they arrived at a *house*, having seen the star as much as two years earlier. King Herod gives orders to kill all boys in Bethlehem and vicinity that are two years old and under, “*in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*” The Magi were astrologers who had traveled a long ways to find Jesus; they were underway a long time, perhaps two years from the time they first saw the star heralding the new king. How long have *you* been searching to find Jesus?

Those of you who read my article in this month’s newsletter may remember that I ruminated about the powerful symbolism of a star – the twinkling in the sky which is actually light that has traveled for thousands of years to traverse vast reaches of the universe before it is viewed by our eyes. An awesome journey!

And today’s candlelighting devotional focused on the journey of Joseph and Mary to get to Bethlehem. All of us are on such a journey. It takes time and effort on our part to find Jesus. And it takes the action of God on our behalf – like the light of the star, planned by God light years in advance in order for that light to reach earth at just the right time to guide the Magi over a lengthy period of time to Judea.

The star on the front cover of our bulletins today gives the call to “prepare.” Are you preparing yourself for the arrival of the Christ? God prepared the star. The Magi prepared by journeying for a couple years. Joseph and Mary prepared, just as any young couple expecting a baby prepare. What are *you* doing to prepare yourself, to prepare your home, to prepare your family for welcoming the newborn king Jesus?

The devotional by J. D. Glick on the back of today’s bulletin cover suggests reading scriptures, singing carols, attending worship services and music programs, and focusing on gifts of love and service to others ... as ways to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ child.

The candlelighting devotional insert reminds us to pay attention to the unexpected encounters of the journey, and to pray for peace to come to the world, as we travel towards Christmas.

The devotional guide that was placed on the window ledge in the lobby today, called *“Changing the Look of Christmas,”* invites us to *“Reflect on the kind of Christmas [we] want”* so that we celebrate Christ and his Way of Life instead of falling into the foolish ways of the world around us. *“Make a wish list of things money can’t buy,”* one suggestion for this week says, *“Share [your list] with your family or friends and discuss how to acquire [those things that money cannot buy].”*

It can be a long road back from the “gimmies” and “gottahaves” that have turned the celebration of Jesus’ birth into a selfish, going-into-debt, buying-more-than-we-need frenzy. It can be a long journey to *rediscover* Jesus – the true Jesus, who focused on healing people and casting out evil, loving God and loving all neighbors, filling the world with a new and right spirit, a spirit of justice and of righteousness, even when that means dying on a cross in order to overcome the powers of sin and death.

I read this week of a man who gave his grandchildren two gifts. One gift was a cataract operation that gave sight to a blind person in Nepal. He made donations for four operations in the names of each of his four grandchildren. The other gift was something to wear or use made in a cooperative craft shop in a poor village in a Third World country. All of his Christmas gifts were purchased from catalogs that support that kind of giving. He writes: *“My feet never hurt [from walking all over the malls], and my soul felt better.”* But ... there was no big gift-wrapped package under the Christmas tree “from Grandfather.” *“It was a hard thing to do. I felt like the*

*Grinch who stole Christmas, even though I know I am not. Christmas was stolen a long time ago. I hope my grandchildren someday will understand I am trying to give Christmas back to them. Not take it away.”*

It may require a complete turn-around for us to walk in the Light that God sends across the light years, to follow the star *away from* the enticing, glittering palaces of Jerusalem to the humble homes of Bethlehem where the true Jesus is to be found. Not everyone sees the star. King Herod certainly couldn't. Only the wise Magi.

Scholars keep trying to figure out whether it was a real star or a metaphysical star that only people of faith could see, since Herod didn't see it. Obviously, they can't prove a supernatural kind of star. But they have theories about what kind of real star it might have been. If you go to a planetarium at Christmas time, they will probably tell you some of the theories. I expect the most logical explanation is the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn and the conjunction of Jupiter with the moon ca. 6 B.C. For astrologers, when Jupiter reappears after being eclipsed by the moon, it symbolizes the emergence of a new regal presence on earth – a new king.

Other theories have to do with the appearance of Halley's Comet in 11 B.C. or a nova recorded by the Chinese chronicle Chien-hen-shu in 5 B.C.

I personally wonder ... I just wonder ... if it is possible that the glory of the angels appearing to the shepherds might have created an unearthly light to attract the eyes of the astrologer Magi to Judea.

Whatever it was, the Magi understood the “star” to be a portent of a new king, rising in the east, like the morning star, herald of a new age about to begin. That's why they went to Jerusalem. And of course they went first to the king's palace to find out about a new king born. But then they heard from King Herod's priests and teachers that the promised king would not come from the palace, but from the ancestral village of the shepherd/king David. And Herod grew insanely jealous.

It can be dangerous to follow the stars God sends. But God will protect you. The Magi were warned not to go back to Herod – for their own protection perhaps and for the protection of the Christ child.

King Herod was not a nice man. In all fairness, he was the one who got people to work on rebuilding the Temple that had been destroyed hundreds of years before. And his reign was noted for the splendor of building amphitheaters, monuments, and fortresses. But, as my NIV Study Bible notes, Herod “*was ruthless, murdering his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others.*” He gave orders to kill all the boys of the Bethlehem area age two and under, to try to get rid of whatever new king might be there. Jesus was spared because Joseph had a dream that he must flee to take Jesus to Egypt until King Herod died.

Our preparing for a true Christmas may well mean that we have to face into the terrors and tumult of a turbulent world. That’s exactly why Jesus comes – to give us courage and spiritual strength beyond our own strength. And some of us know all too well our great need for this Jesus. We may resonate with a poem I would entitle, “Wanting to Skip Christmas.” It was originally published in *Solo, the Magazine for the Christian Single*, under the title, “A Christmas Prayer,” by Dorothy Hsu.

It's Christmas, Lord.  
 The season to be jolly and all that.  
 But some of us aren't so jolly.  
 It's time for families to be together,  
 To sing "I'll be home for Christmas."  
 But Lord,  
 Some of our loved ones won't be home  
 This year,  
 Or ever.  
 And some of us find it very difficult  
 To shop for Aunt Jane  
 And Grandpa.  
 Some of us find our minds so  
 Occupied with a desperately ill child,  
 Or a tired worn-out body  
 That we can't cope with crowds  
 Or carols.  
 And some of us find that  
 Happy memories of Christmases past  
 Make this Christmas seem Hollow,  
 Altogether unbearable.  
 It's a temptation, Lord,  
 To just skip it,

To refuse to decorate a tree,  
 or send a card,  
 Or purchase a single present.

For one alone,  
 Such an approach is possible,  
 I suppose.  
 But for little ones in a home, Lord,  
 It's unfair.

It takes tremendous strength  
 For some of us to say  
 "Merry Christmas" this year.  
 More strength than  
 Some of us even possess.

And that's exactly why you came,  
 Isn't it, Lord?

End of poem.

Some of us know all too well the struggle to celebrate when life is so difficult. It is a long journey to follow the mere twinkle of a star – but it is astounding to ponder how God is at work through tremendous tumults that have taken place in distant galaxies in order to create flashes of light that travel light years to provide that mere twinkle for us ... and the twinkle of the star is a portent of the tremendous changes that will yet transform our lives and our world when we reach our destination, when we finally get fully in touch with Jesus! He is the Rising Star who brings a new Day, a New Kingdom, a completely different experience of Life – Life with the Holy Lord God Almighty that overcomes the powers of sin and death forever.

Follow the star God calls you to follow. Prepare to find Jesus. That's what the wise Magi did long ago. That's what you and I can do today. Find Jesus. Amen.

Carol *The First Noel* 199