

Following the Star

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 2: 1-12

Delivered on January 6, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

Well, let me begin by taking a moment to wish everyone here a Happy New Year! Let's say it together, "Happy New Year!"

The other day I was remarking to my family that 2019 seems like a really high number to me. It almost takes my breath away. For half my life it seems like we were looking forward to the year 2000, wondering what on earth the new millennium would bring, and now we are almost twenty years into that millennium. And it seems to me like these past 19 years have gone by in the blink of an eye. So, I begin today by wishing you a happy new year and by forcing you to say "Happy New Year to me" I suppose, because as we find ourselves moving further and further into the future, the wish for a happy new year has taken on a new meaning for me. For most of us when we are young, the chances are that our futures will be happy are pretty good. When you are a child each new year brings you one step closer to liberation, one step closer to adulthood and independence and under most circumstances it doesn't bring any concerns about your health, so there is little need to worry that the future won't be happy. When we are children each new year is one step closer to leaving the house, going off to college or to the military, or work, one step closer to having your own place, one step closer to being able to decide your own comings and goings without mom and dad's approval. But when we get a little older, the future can bring more worries about health and worries that you may soon lose that independence, and while your children and grandchildren may embrace the freedom that the future brings, that freedom for you can be scary. And you ask yourself, "Have I done all I can to prepare them for the future, are they ready as they leave the nest." As the future is not always

comforting with a little age, the wish for happiness in the future takes on a new meaning. At least in my experience, it becomes more than just words that you take for granted and don't think about.

The story of the Epiphany is the story of a group of astrologers or magi as we call them. They are also called wise men and of course sometimes we call them kings, even three kings. But though they come bearing three kinds of gifts, there is no indication in the bible of how many of them there are, or that they are royal in any way. And though we call them wise, what I think was originally meant in calling them wise men was calling them educated men. They are learned in the field of astrology and they know what this star in the East signifies. But it is a little bit ironic I think that we call them "wise", because they don't really have any idea what they're doing do they? At the sighting of this star in the east, they know they are looking for a newborn king, but they really have no idea what kind of king they're looking for. They have no understanding of the kingdom of heaven that this newborn baby will inaugurate, and they fully expect that this king will reign in a palace because they come looking for him in the political capital of Jerusalem. They have no knowledge of the conditions of what he is born into and so they come bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh. What they should have brought were some blankets, some burp cloths and maybe some first-century type of pacifier. And it gets worse. But to tell you how much worse it gets we have to dig into the story a bit. You see, when the magi get to Jerusalem they are wandering the streets with their strange outfits from the East and speaking with their strange accents and they must stick out like a sore thumb. They get everyone's attention, and everyone knows they are running around saying "Where is this one who is born the king of the Jews?" Well, pretty soon King Herod gets a report of these strange

visitors who are asking this question and he says “I don’t know what they’re talking about, I’m the only king that I know about.” And then after being alerted of this, the king summons all the bible scholars of the land who find some obscure passage in the book of Micah and tell him this king will be born in Bethlehem. So he calls the magi to his court and gives them a map to Bethlehem and says when you find him, send word back to me, so I can worship him, too. But the king had no intention of going to worship the Christ child, did he? His intention was to kill this newborn king because in his mind there was only room enough for one king in Judea. So when the magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, that’s when the king decided he would have every infant in Bethlehem put to the sword. If he couldn’t learn what exact baby would take his throne he would just have every possible baby who might be this new king killed. One way or another, he would be the only king in Judea. So after digging into the story a bit, what else do we learn about the magi? We learn that these magi alert the king to this event that they had no need to alert him to, and this almost costs the Christchild his life, to say nothing of the lives of countless infants in Bethlehem.

Wise men? More like bungling men, foolish men. For they have no idea what they’re doing, and no idea of what they’re getting into. But they see this star rising in the east, and they know enough to know that this star brings the promise of a new age. A new age of what and of who and of how, well, they can’t answer those questions. All they can do is shrug their shoulders. But they know it is an event that is going to change everything. They know it is an event that they can’t miss, and they come bearing gifts to welcome this new age, whatever it may be. Maybe that is why we call them “wise”. Maybe that is enough to make them wise.

Well, here we find ourselves on January 6th. There is a star rising in the east that is the star of 2019. It is the star of this new event in our lives. Now, of course, the number 2019 doesn't really mean anything. It is a number that signifies 2019 years since the birth of Christ, but no one knows exactly what year Christ was born. And even if we did know, they have a completely different year on the Jewish calendar and a third year on the Chinese calendar. In fact, we are all only a week older than we were the last time we got together, we are not a whole year older. And though we start a new year in January we could just as well decide to start it in May or June or September. We don't even have to start the new year in the season of winter. It's summertime in Australia and New Zealand right now. All of this is a bit arbitrary. But we do have to put it at some point, we do have to put it at some point that remains fixed to mark a point at which the earth completes a trip around the sun, and every time we pass that point it invites us to wonder to ourselves, what will the next three hundred sixty five days bring? What will it bring before the earth goes around the sun again? Will there be health or sickness? Companionship or loneliness? Joy or despair? What will it bring?

And the question it invites us to ask ourselves is this one. Do we have enough faith to welcome what this new year brings? Do we despair and put our heads in the sand and run away in fear, or do we have the faith to welcome it bearing gifts? What are we going to do? And what having faith means specifically is that we will trust that the same God we knew all our lives will be the one who guides us into this strange, unknown future.

The sad reality though is that while we who are in Christ ought to be the kind of people who lead the world into the future, we are usually the last people to lead the world into the future. Far too many places in our society that have the word "church" on the door are places

where once you go inside, it is as if you are stepping back in time. You have people reminiscing about a glorious time for Christians decades ago. A time before drugs a time before bad language in music and on television, a time before people questioning traditional sexual roles and gender roles, a time of innocence. You hear people saying nothing about the present time unless it is about how awful it is, how bad the kids are these days, and there are even churches out there who will try to build campuses where people never have to leave the safety of the past and venture out into the world of the future. They have gyms and schools and coffee shops and everything you can imagine that you might find out on the outside. But is that really faith? Oh, I know people call it faith, but is it really faith? If we really believe that God is in control, shouldn't we be the ones leading the world into the future, not the ones who are like an army in retreat, building bunkers and fortresses and hiding from the world? That doesn't mean that we have to welcome and embrace everything in the present world, and it doesn't mean we can't ever reminisce and pine for a different time. But God doesn't have us in 1959. God has us in 2019. And there is no faith in God apart from following God into the future. Faith in God is not just a matter of being able to recite the Apostle's Creed and quote some scriptures. It is a matter of believing in one who says "I am the Alpha and the Omega, (or "the A and the Z" as we would say it), the first and the last." Faith is not just a matter of believing that 2000 years ago, Christ was raised from the dead and talking about how that sets you apart from people who don't believe that, it is about believing that Christ is risen now even in this age with everything we love and hate about this age. Faith is not just a matter of believing that 2000 years ago, Jesus befriended the friendless and loved the unlovable and forgave the unforgivable, it is a

matter of believing that Jesus is still doing those things today and doing those things through us whenever we befriend, and love and forgive in his name.

As the wise men came from the East, what did they really know? They didn't know where they were going. They came bearing the completely wrong kinds of gifts. They bungled their way into the whole event of God being on earth, courting disaster and almost ending it as soon as it began. All they knew was that this star signaled a new age and they welcomed that new age. May we do the same as we follow that same star wherever the way may lead.