

Matthew 2:1-12 Follow the Light

Epiphany
January 3rd, 2016

Today we live in a deeply “spiritual” age. I would submit to you the success of the movie series “Star Wars” with its latest installment “The Force Awakens” is my number one exhibit. There is a deep yearning within people for a power that is greater than them and this series reveals that yearning through its overwhelming popularity earning over \$1 billion during its opening weekend.

In this series there is “The Chosen One”. There is an evil satanic figure Darth Vader and the “Dark side of the Force.” And then there is “the good side of the Force.” In that its portrayal of “god” has a good and bad side is more like Zoroastrianism than Christianity for many it satisfies a deep spiritual longing. The Star Wars movie series follows the basic pattern of the Christian message like the Matrix series and the Lord of the Rings series. And “The Force” is spoken of in the same terms we speak of the Holy Spirit: trust the force, the force will guide you...

We can use this to direct people to the “light that enlightens all people.” Today is an age of great spirituality and searching, and great opportunity for the church. Many are looking for God and we as Christians know the way to God through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who is the Word and **“the Light and life of all human beings.”**

Epiphany is January 6th. That is the day we celebrate the Light of Christ coming into the world, symbolized by the star, and the end of the 12 days of the Christmas season.

Many people because of the many wars and natural disasters and economic calamities throughout the world over the last couple of decades have declared these to be the end times and try to discern the exact time. The popularity of the Left Behind series and movie speaks to this.

And actually our scripture today speaks of the end of an age and the beginning of another!

In our scripture we meet “**wise men from the east**”. The word used to describe these men in the Greek is **Magi**. Magi or “wise men” were a learned class of men. They studied the earth and sky and interpreted dreams. They were of a priestly class from the Persian or Babylonian area, what we call today Iraq and Iran.

These Magi represent those outside of the faith. The “**Nations that shall come to your light**” as **Isaiah 60:3** says. They represent those outside of the Jewish and Christian faith who God is calling to the Light. God is using the light that he has placed in them to call them to the true light in Jesus Christ.

The Magi’s light literally was a great big star that pointed them in the general direction of Jerusalem. In reading for this sermon I read about 6 possible natural phenomena that this bright star could actually have been, but the one I liked the best was that it was possibly the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of the Fishes.



A researcher named “Stauffer holds the Magi noted only the beginning of the conjunction (the appearance of Jupiter in the east) and then set out for Palestine.



Upon arriving they witnessed the extremely rare (once ever 794 years) conjunction (or alignment) of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of the Fishes.”

Note that when they left Jerusalem for Bethlehem they saw “the star they had seen in the east” and were filled with Joy. Stauffer goes on to say that since Jupiter was regarded as the star of the universe,

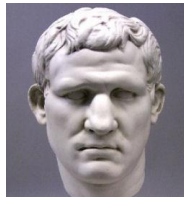
Saturn the planet of Palestine, and

the constellation of the Fishes the sign of the last days, this rare conjunction could only mean (to them) the ruler of the Last days would appear in Palestine.”

Now there were other bright natural celestial phenomena around the time of Jesus’ birth (such as Hailey’s Comet), but this one I feel fits the events the best. And we cannot dismiss the supernatural.

And around the time of Jesus’ birth there was a general hope and expectation of the coming of a Messiah, or King in many of the cultures of the Mid-east.

There was expectation that Someone would be sent to save them in the midst of a particularly dark time in human history. How dark?



In Jerusalem Herod the Great reigned as king but it was not Jewish blood and royal descent that brought him to power. It was Roman power and appointment.

All of Israel was under Roman occupation and many battles and wars had been fought. The people struggled through famines and disease and watched and heard of Herod’s murderous rages.

Now most scholars believe Jesus Christ was born between 6 and 4 BC., because the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter occurred about 7BC. One source in fact said a conjunction of these two planets occurred 3 times in 7BC. And most importantly of all Herod the Great died in 4 BC.

The year 0 was picked as the date of Jesus birth, but they were off a few years, and why is a topic of another long historical discussion, which won't happen today.

But Herod was a suspicious murderous old man when Jesus came to earth. Herod had his favorite wife Mariamne murdered and her mother as well, along with his eldest son Antipater. Mariamne was described as Herod's "favorite wife"; just imagine how he treated his other 9.

Herod also had 2 other sons Alexander and Aristobulus murdered just 5 days before his own death. Anyone Herod thought was a threat to his power he eliminated.

The Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus said of Herod, "It's safer to be Herod's pig than son." You can see why the scripture says, "When King Herod heard this (about the birth of the Messiah), he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him." They knew someone was going to die.

It was a dark and deeply spiritual time like today filled with great expectation and hope and into this darkness a light shined and that light was Jesus Christ.

Now we need to look carefully at the scripture to see what it is actually saying in order for it to guide us to the light and help us guide others to the light, because we can let the scriptures get obscured by our own hopes and dreams, legends and desires.

We may sing of "3 Kings" but note carefully the number of Magi is never mentioned. The "3" in number was speculated because there were 3 gifts. There might have been 2 Magi or 12 as others speculate, but all we really know is that there were more than 1 Magi.

Next, that they were "Kings" wasn't added until about 700 years after Jesus was born. It was an interpolation back into scriptures from

Psalm 72:10 & 15 and Isaiah 49:7. The scripture actually says they were Magi not Kings.

Next they were never at the stable. In verse 11 it says, “On entering the house, they saw the child...”

The scripture here says where they visited Jesus was a house not a stable and they visited a “child” not a “baby”.



4 times in these verses Jesus is referred to as a “child”, not a “baby”.

The Magi weren't kings and probably didn't arrive until Jesus was 2, which is why Herod had all the children 2 and under slaughtered in Bethlehem. He wanted no rivals to his throne.

The 1st point here is that for us to really know what God is calling us to do we really need to know what the scripture is really accurately saying.

We need to separate fact from our own hopeful desires which often aren't God's. **We need to carefully evaluate the scriptures so we can carefully evaluate our beliefs which guide the actions of our lives.**

The 2nd point I want to make is that **all this restless, searching spirituality** that is present in the world today and back then **is God given and needs direction.**

Nature and natural phenomena, dreams and visions can only guide us so far in the discovery of God. **It is scripture that is the map to help us find our way all the way home.**

In verse 4 Herod “called together all the chief priests and scribes of the people and he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.”



Verse 6 reads, “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.’”

Note the final answer and direction to find Jesus came through Scripture. The scribes and priests pointed out correctly where the Messiah was to be born and it was only then the Magi went the final distance to find Jesus.

These verses in fact are a not so subtle argument against astrology. Nature and natural phenomena can take us only so far in the discovery of God. It is scripture that takes us home.

The mystery here that comes as a warning and guide to us is that the Priests and Scribes, though, they knew the scriptures they did not follow them. They knew where the Messiah was to be born, but they did not seek him.

Now the prejudicial may say, “Oh, that’s the Jews back then not us today.”

Well the third point here is that it does apply today. If we are not aware we too can do the same. Just as **the Magi represent those outside the faith** being drawn to the light, **the Priests and Scribes represent those within the faith** who become so tied up in the details of the faith they forget who they are worshiping and why they are worshipping.

The Priests and the Scribes did nothing. They did not go to Bethlehem to find Jesus. They were so tied up in their rituals and legal arguments they missed the point of them, which was the Messiah, Jesus. **They knew the Word but did not follow it.**

But do we also get so tied up in our activities, our social services, our dinners and events to the point we forget why we are having them?

Do we “meet to eat and eat to meet” to the point we forget we are meeting and eating with Jesus?

And that it is fellowship with Jesus and inviting others into fellowship with Jesus that is the point of our meeting and all the celebrations of this season past and the Easter season to come?

People are responding to the light of God that God has given them and in this day and age of wide spread spirituality it means many are wandering around lost in the dark looking for any light, any star to follow, even a made up movie series star. But it is through Christ as revealed in the Scripture that we can lead them home.

We too as individuals and as a church need to respond to the light God has given us and find our way home; so that we can intentionally lead others home. The Word is a lamp to our feet and that light calls us and others home.



We ourselves need to know the Word of God. We need to know the Scriptures and apply them to our lives.

In this New Year I want to encourage everyone to dive into the scriptures in a deeper way; to enquire of the scriptures where the Christ is being born into our lives. I want us to be like the Wise Men and still search for Jesus. And what we find about Jesus we apply to our lives.

We can do that through private devotion times using devotional guides like the Upper Room, or the Moravian Texts, or read through the Bible in a year guides.

I also want to point out that here at Vista Church there are corporate opportunities to study the Scriptures to find Jesus, and then apply what we have learned to our lives, and in service to our community.

On Sunday Mornings we have Sunday school for Children and Youth during the worship hour.

Monday Mornings we have a women's Bible Study.

During the week we have UMW studies and programs. The Men's group is going to be starting a Bible Study based on the Upper Room Devotional a sample of which you can find in our bulletin.

And we need more. We need people willing to look into the scriptures from many different angles to understand and apply the word. In fact, my challenge to some today who have been looking for a smaller group Bible study is to stop looking and start something. The resources to do this are enormous. Please talk with me.

The Epiphany Star, the Bright Light, the Light of life has come into this world to illumine our hearts and lives. Let us follow it to the Messiah. Wise men and women still seek Him. Won't you?

In Jesus' name amen.