

“Keeping an Eye on the Star”

Sermon: Year B, Epiphany (*observed*)

Text: Matthew 2:1–12

Preached: January 7, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from Christ Jesus, the Bright and Morning Star. AMEN

Several years ago, Tom and I took a three-week trip to South Africa. It’s a beautiful country—and vast. We were staying with friends. Early one morning the two of us decided to take a long day trip out to see a Zulu village. OK, I decided, and Tom reluctantly agreed. We made the long drive, and had a good time. On the way back to our friends’ house, we looked at the roadmap—remember those? no GPS or phone at hand—and saw that we could save a couple of hours by cutting across one of the big game preserves instead of driving around it. It was nearing the end of the afternoon, but the elderly gatekeeper agreed to let us in to the park only if we promised to go straight across and not stop. You see, they close the gates to the preserve at sundown, because of poachers, and if you’ve not exited in time, you’re locked in the park for the night. He warned that we would barely have time to make it. He gave us a photocopied, hand-drawn map of the park, and we set out on the unpaved red-dirt roads. His only instruction was to keep turning right every chance we got to turn, and that would lead us to the exit at the other side. And don’t get out of the car for any reason, because it would be feeding time for the lions.

As we entered, we noticed we were getting low on gas, because the little light on the dashboard was illuminated, but that was OK, because the map showed there was a gas station at the ranger camp in the center of the preserve. We would be going right past it. No problem. I won’t go into the delay caused by Tom not responding when I said, “Look out for that...rock!”—*phwoosh*, went the tire. Nor will I dwell on struggling to change the tire in uneven, powdery dust while rangers who had happened by stood watch with an elephant rifle. Nor will I bore you with the detail about the little photocopied map blowing out the open car window, leaving us with no guide other than the gatekeeper’s instruction to keep turning right...that’s another tale. At any rate, the tire fixed, we headed toward the gas station...which was closed for the season. After an encounter with a terrifically stubborn Cape buffalo whose horns were wider than the road, and who refused to cede the roadway, we got to the gates of the park just as they were preparing to close them. Still no gasoline, but we figured that, once back on paved highways, there would be gas stations. The light on the display was glowing steadily. My anxiety was rising, but we figured we would be fine. There would have to be gas along a major thoroughfare.

We drove for twenty minutes or so, and no gas. We came to the tollroad, and asked the toll attendant where we could find gasoline. She responded very politely, pointing in the direction we were headed, “I think ten kilometers.” Apparently she had not been more than nine kilometers down that particular highway, because there was no gas station to be found. The needle was now below empty, and the light was a piercing beacon in the darkened car, because the sun had just gone down in a blaze of glory. We drove on, not sure of what to do. Finally, we saw a sign indicating that there was gasoline ten kilometers off of the main highway. We debated whether we should risk getting off the main road, or stay on the tollway and run out of gas where there would at least be cars passing by. We opted for the gas station, and exited the tollway. We drove the ten kilometers, and in the darkness very nearly missed the gas station...which really would not have mattered much, because it was boarded up and looked as though it had not been open for years. The warning light glowed steadily. So then the debate became, did we head back to the tollroad, or risk driving down another darkened highway toward what looked on the roadmap to be a town of several thousand—some 20 more kilometers away.

We opted for the town. And so we drove on through the dark. You can’t imagine how dark it is there at night—thick darkness—nor how many stars there are in the sky, but we couldn’t appreciate the beauty of the sky, because we were on a deserted road, anxious and not knowing where we going for sure, our eyes fixed on that glowing gas light. Finally, after an eternity, another light appeared in the darkness, shining like the star of Bethlehem. “BP,” it said. We headed toward that light, and pulled in 5 minutes before they were going to close for the night. And like the magi in today’s gospel reading, we were overwhelmed with joy. Our tank refilled, we headed back toward our friends’ house...by a different way, a way we hadn’t planned on...but we got home.

Have you ever wondered how the magi felt after their long trek? The story tells us virtually nothing about them. Matthew is the only gospel that mentions them at all. We really don’t know where they came from—one ancient manuscript even suggests they came from China. We don’t know how many of them there

were—the Western tradition is that there were three of them, since there are three gifts mentioned, but in parts of the Orthodox tradition is said that there were twelve of them. The other manuscript I just mentioned says there were “scores” of them. We don’t know that they were all men. We don’t know their names, and many possibilities have been mentioned over the centuries, including the one mentioned on the Chalking of the Door handout. All we know from the story is that they are magi, or *magoi*—magician astrologers who search the stars for signs so they can predict the future. Not quite scientists, not quite fortune-tellers, not quite priests. Certainly not kings. What they are, though, is seekers, people who are trying to understand something beyond themselves, people who are trying to make sense of their world. They aren’t followers of the God of Israel, but they are people with a spiritual hunger and a lively curiosity. When they see a star arise in the night sky, discerning it among the countless stars in the heavens, they decide it must mean something important—important enough that they decide to drop everything and set out together on a quest to find the new king whose birth such a light must be announcing. Maybe they invited other seekers to come along with them. After all, there is strength in numbers on such a trip. It’s good to have companions on the way.

Can you imagine how challenging it would be to set out on a journey with such sketchy details? They must have been very confused and disappointed when they showed up after their long journey at the one logical place to look for the heralded heir to the throne...they went to King Herod’s palace. When the king told them there was no new heir that *he* knew of, they must have looked at one another with looks of “You must be kidding me...we rode all this way?? Whose idea was this?” But the chief priests and scribes that Herod consulted said, “Well, there *is* this prophecy that a shepherd king for Israel will be born in Bethlehem...it’s about 10 more kilometers up the road.” And so the magi set out again, in the dark, toward Bethlehem, not knowing where they’re going, just looking for the light. And they see that light glowing in the darkness, and they head toward it, overwhelmed with joy. And then confusion must have set in again when they realized that this star, this beacon that had led them so far from home was standing over a small rented house occupied by a construction worker, his teenaged wife, and a toddler. It didn’t fit their expectation. It doesn’t fit *our* expectation, does it? What kind of king could this be?

We like knowing exactly where we’re headed, don’t we? We want our whole route to be clear, and we don’t want to worry about running out of gas along the way. But the reality of our lives is that following the star of Bethlehem is a journey, a quest...a journey along which sometimes we don’t really know exactly where we’re headed...but we know that we have seen a star, and that it has announced something important to us, and that it is leading us. There will be pitfalls along the way, dark stretches of that journey, thick darkness, times where it seems the only light we can pay attention to is the glowing light on the dashboard, our only panicked thought that we may soon run out of gas. Like the magi, as we journey together, we may along the way head down some roads where we expect to find what we’re looking for, only to be disappointed to find that the answer is not there, and that we’re going to have to keep journeying to get to where the star is leading us. And so we travel on, not alone, but together, reminding one another as traveling companions that if we open our eyes and strain to see in the darkness, we can see our star once again, and can head toward it, trusting that it is leading us toward something wonderful...even if we’re not entirely sure of what it is we’re seeking. And when we get where the star is leading, we will know that overwhelming joy of realizing that the star has led us exactly where we need to be: the star has led us to Jesus, this long expected yet unexpected child, Immanuel, God with us, found in the most unexpected places of our lives, down roads we never knew we would travel.

And this, sisters and brothers, is the Good News of the Epiphany season, when we celebrate the True Light that has been revealed to the world...that no matter what our journey, no matter what unexpected places we find ourselves in, no matter how dark the road may be at times, no matter what detours we find ourselves taking, the Light still shines in the darkness, not a warning light like the dashboard gas light, but a welcoming, guiding Light that calls us on to an adventure. And even if we lose our way at times, or take long detours, or even if we simply get weary from the journey, we can always rediscover, again and again, this Jesus, this perfect Light who enlightens everyone who comes into the world. The Good News of Epiphany is that we have companions on the journey, others who are questing. Just keep your eye on the star, even if you have to scan the skies to find it. Trust its leading. And like the magi, we can again and again fall down in wonder and worship the God who shows up in unexpected places. Thanks be to God. AMEN