

**"Star and Stable"**  
**Sermon for Epiphany Sunday**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**January 3, 2010**  
**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**  
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The Epiphany of the Lord is one day for celebrating what actually is true every day: that the light of God's love in Jesus Christ shines for everyone in the relative darkness of our world. Just as the star of the nativity story was seen by wise men far away in the East, the Light of the World shines for all humankind. Wise men and women still seek him to whose birth the Christmas star pointed. Each one of us can help the radiant light of God's love shine with universal visibility.

The wise men should have more than a symbolic significance for us. As individuals they merit our attention because of their willingness to follow the star "until it came and stopped over the place where the child was." It just makes sense that because the magi were looking for a newborn king, they must have thought they were being led to a royal palace. That's where kings are born. It's always been that way, even to this day. So can you imagine the surprise of those three kings when they ultimately were directed to a stable? The magnificent star had suggested a much different kind of destination.

Stars symbolize so many varied things in our lives. Think of all the popular songs down through the years that refer to stars in some way. Think of our fascination with the stars and what lies beyond our world that provides the basis for books, movies, and television series. We use the term "star" to describe the best and the brightest in any field of endeavor. Stars promise transcendent realities. *Star Trek*. They stir our imaginations and foster wonderful dreams. "When you wish upon a star . . ." They are followed with immense expectations. "Second star to the right and straight on 'til morning."

Stables, on the other hand, represent the opposite end of reality. Many of you have been in a stable, but perhaps some of you have not. If you have missed that opportunity, let me make sure you understand something about stables: they smell bad, real bad. They are filthy. They often are crude shelters for protecting and feeding livestock. Not a lot of architectural creativity goes into constructing a stable. Frank Gehry has never designed one. So when the wise men began their long journey toward the west, they doubtless never imagined it would end where it did. But such is often the case when we journey with God by following Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Actually, this is precisely what happens when we decide to follow a star, whatever star that might be. It is exactly how all of us experience life on a daily basis. Life is an ambiguous mixture of "star"

and "stable." There is the sparkling and the smelly, the majestic and the messy, the dazzling and the dreary. The task at every stage of the human journey is to understand these two realities. *The near-impossible challenge is to reconcile them.* About the best we can do most of the time is to find a way to keep them in balance—"star" and "stable." If we fail in this balancing act, we find trouble, usually in one of two ways.

Sometimes we suffer from *too much star and not enough stable.* This is the tendency of the idealist. Idealists are passionate about following the star, but often are unprepared for the inevitable reality to which it leads. Idealists can be so preoccupied with their vision of how things *could* be or even *should* be that they have a difficult time coping with the reality of how things really *are*.

You may not know this, but most people who choose to become ministers in the local church are idealists. There are more first-born children, the "ought" children, in seminary than those of other birth orders. Their sense of calling often is accompanied by visions of wondrous possibilities. When their preparation for ministry is completed and they arrive at their first congregational appointment, it may resemble a stable. These men and women were full of zeal to serve the "ideal church," perfect in every way, a model of what Jesus himself intended for it to be. But they quickly discover sitting in the

pews ordinary people with status quo values and pretty mundane and rather petty problems.

The truth for all of us, clergy and laity alike, is to realize that the ideal church is never fully actualized in any given congregation. But that is not our mission field anyway, never has been and never will be. What glory we experience in life is always found in the bleak and barren situations we are working together to redeem. However, we are going to have a hard time accepting that fact if we suffer from too much star and not enough stable.

Sometimes we suffer from the opposite dilemma, *too much stable and not enough star*. The pessimist sees few stars but plenty of gutters and grime. Pessimists have capitulated to the dark side of the human condition, whether they realize it or not. Their response to almost every situation is negative—whether through cynicism, suspicion, or hopelessness. Pessimists have little vision of their own and tend to discount the visions of others. Their plight is the loss of any meaningful sense in daily living. They have drawn their conclusions about life from their experience of entirely too much stable.

The underlying perspective we find throughout scripture has been called biblical realism. It holds the disparities and inconsistencies of life in balance. It does not yield to naïve idealism on the one hand, or to a hopeless pessimism on the other. The Bible understands that only

God is purely and absolutely good. The world of our human existence is full of ambiguities, just as each one of us is an ambiguous or paradoxical mixture of light and darkness, good and evil.

In Jesus Christ we have the example of how to accept the ambiguities of life realistically by trusting in God. I read in the paper the other day a quote from Oscar Wilde concerning New Year's resolutions. He said they were the same thing for us as a check written on a bank where we have no account. In other words, worthless. But Wilde also had something realistically beneficial to say about living in our world: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" [*Lady Windermere's Fan*]. In Christ we see a sublime balancing of star and stable. In his followers we find a consistent balancing of realism and vision (stable and star) and a faith that affirms and supports both.

Nearly everyone is following some star. We have the freedom to choose which star we will seek after. Our character and our future are determined in that "moment of commitment when each of us chooses [his or her] star out of a sky [full] of stars" [Arthur Miller]. For the Christian, as for the magi, that star is Jesus Christ. Browning called him the "star that chose to stoop and stay for us." Bethlehem's famous star can reside with us, in our hearts. Then the stables of the world become places and opportunities for service in Christ's name.

So as we come to the table for the first time in 2010 and as we begin to set goals for our church's ministries and missions for this new year, may we commit ourselves to remembering that the star shines *over* the stable, flooding it with light and bringing holiness, honor, and dignity to what otherwise would be considered unworthy of such an outpouring of grace. In the year to come, may we as congregation members do all we can to bring the light of Christ into all the stables we encounter and consider it not only our duty but our privilege to do so.