

## **“Following God's Star”**

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus and, once again, a Happy New Year to all of you.

Let's get right into it today. There are a number of things about this particular Sunday that make it stand out. One, it's the first Sunday in a new year. There's something about a new year that gives opportunity for each of us to look back on where we've been and to look forward to what's possible in the months to come. I want us to do a bit of that here this morning.

Two, it's the first Sunday following our congregation-wide 40 Days of Prayer. From the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving to this past Thursday on New Year's Day, (as most of you know) we've challenged ourselves to be praying (each day) for God's guidance in our lives individually and for his guidance for our shared life as a congregation. We're going to be doing something a bit different here today as a result, and I'll say more about that in a few moments.

Third, it's the Sunday just prior to a day in which we celebrate what's called the “epiphany.” An epiphany is when something is seen or revealed, for the first time; something we never saw before that we now see; something we never knew or understood that we now do. Our reading today was the story of the Wise Men who came to know and to see and to understand who Jesus is and what God had revealed about himself (to us) in his Son. We'll be using that story to see if there might be an “epiphany” awaiting us.

And fourth, it's a Sunday in which I honestly don't know what's going to happen, what it will mean (when it's over), where it might lead, and what will follow in our future as a result. By the time we're finished today, and again (in the same way) next week, we'll each have been given opportunity to put down on paper what we believe God has been telling us during these 40 days of prayer. From there, we'll be taking what we've heard, what God's been saying, and trying to collectively figure out what it means.

The title for our message today is “Following God's Star; Following God's Star.” It comes (obviously) from that story of the Wise Men who did exactly that. They followed God's Star. They followed the star God had given. And when they did, they had an epiphany. They came to see and to know and to understand something they had never been able to before.

Now, we don't know too much about them, those wise men. They were well-educated, most likely. Maybe scientists? Maybe astronomers? Maybe they had studied many things? We really don't know. What we know is what they did. What we know is the One they found. What we know is that these Wise Men were wise.

One of the wisest men I ever knew was my grandfather; my dad's dad. He was a wise man. He knew a lot. He never went too far in school. He graduated from high school (if I remember right), had a bit of training after that. He ended up working for Standard Oil. He got involved in City Government. He had no college, no seminary, no academic degrees following his name. But he was a wise man. He understood life. He understood what matters in life.

Now, let me ask you a question. (You know the story.) The Wise Men followed the star. It led them to Bethlehem. They didn't know where it would lead, but they followed. They didn't know what they might find, or what it might mean for their lives, but they kept on searching until they found, and then they knew.

Let me ask you. What is it (do you think) that made these Wise Men wise? Why is it (do you think) that (2000 years later) that's how they are still remembered? Were they wise because of what they knew (what they had learned)? Or were they wise because of what they did (how they applied what they knew in their lives)?

I've known many learned men over the years, many well-educated women. They were all smart. They all knew what they were doing. But not all of them were wise. Not all of them understood life. What is it that makes a person wise? What is it that makes us wise?

40 Days of Prayer; that's what we've just finished. We've been praying for 40 days, asking for God's guidance. God, what do you want me to do? Lord, where do you want me to go? What is it you want for my life? What is it you want for our life? For 40 days, that's been our prayer. A new year, a new start, 2015, a chance to make a difference? God, what do you want us to do in this place, at this time?

Later in our worship, during our prayer time, that's what we'll be doing. During that time of prayer, we're going to giving you time to write down what you've heard. On one of the inserts in the bulletin, there's a place to write down what you believe God has been telling you. What he's been saying to you about your own life and what he's been saying to you about our shared life. There's a place for both.

Now, I have no idea what God has been saying to you, what's happened in those prayer conversations you've had with God. You have no idea what he's been telling me, what I believe I've heard as a result of the time I've spent. And I don't even know if what I've heard is exactly what God wants me to hear. Sometimes we don't know until we test it out.

What I do know is that praying to God for 40 days (in itself) is not (necessarily) a wise thing to do. Those 40 days of prayer (on their own) are good. It's always a good thing to pray. (Don't mishear what we're saying.) It's never a bad thing to pray. But those 40 days of prayer (in themselves) don't (on their own) make us any wiser than we were before they started. Praying to God (without doing anything beyond that), in response, doesn't make a person wise.

What makes a person wise (what makes us wise) and how prayer works is that we take what we've heard, take what God has been saying, and pay attention. It's our response (to God's response) that makes the difference. It's what we do with what God is doing (and what he has said) that makes us wise.

That's the story Jesus told about the man who had built his house on the rock in contrast to the man who had built his house on the sand. (You remember.) When the rains came, (the winds blew), the house on the rock stood strong, while the house on the sand fell apart. Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, "It's the ones who hear his words and put them into practice who are the wise ones in life. It's the ones who take they've heard and respond to it (apply it in what they're doing) whose houses will withstand the storms.

Now, Jesus (in that story) was talking about his word, about what God said to us in the Bible. (That's what the story was about.) But the same thing applies to prayer, to our 40 days of prayer. If all we do is pray, ask for God's guidance, and then fail to apply what we've heard, we're fools. 2015 (Jesus says) will be no different than it would have been had we not prayed. But if we pray and we listen, and then apply what we've heard, who knows what might lie ahead and where God might choose to lead?

Now, I don't know what lies ahead and where God is leading any more than you do. What I do know is that God knows (what lies ahead) and what I do know is that you and I have been called to follow wherever he leads.

That's what the wise men did. They saw the star and they followed. They saw the star and it lead them to where God wanted them to go. That's what we're going to be doing. We'll each have a chance (during our prayer time) to write down on that prayer insert what we've been praying about and what we've heard. We'll give you time to write down some of your thoughts.

What we want to hear is what God has been saying, what he's been telling you. What we don't want to hear is what you think we need to do, what you'd like to tell God. Now, maybe they're the same? Maybe they're different? (It doesn't matter.) Either way, what we want to hear (for you to write down) is God's voice and not yours.

What we're going to do with what you write are two things. One, we're going to be passing them on to our leaders and our staff and compiling the results. To pray and to not listen is foolish. To pray and to respond is wise. We're going be taking what your write down and figuring out what we hope (and believe) will be an appropriate response.

The other thing we're going to do is to put up on display what each of us has written. Next week they'll be a place where your responses will be visible, for anyone who wants to read and to see, to read and see. So, if you want your response to be confidential, then don't put your name on the paper. If you do or you don't care, then you can. Again, either way is fine.

You know what's often struck me in this story, what fascinates me every time I read it? It's the fact that these wise men couldn't have been the only ones to see the star. Hundreds of thousands of others must have seen the star as well. But nothing happened. They didn't do anything. They saw the star, knew that it was new, but nothing changed.

The same thing can happen in the church. The same thing can happen in each of our lives. This is the first Sunday in the New Year, a day when we remember the epiphany that led the wise men to Christ.

Now, why do you think it is that we come together every week? Why do you think it is that we spend time in this place every Sunday as we do? Is it to simply learn and to become smart, and to be ready to answer any Bible-based question that might come up? Or is there a deeper reason, a more foundational reason, a more life-changing reason that God speaks to us as he does?

We could spend all day talking about why we're here, why it's important to come together every week. The list of reasons for our life as a church is as long as the years of our history together as a church. (We could spend all day.) But if we fail to listen to what God says, to take what we learn and apply it? Jesus says we'd be fools. Jesus says we'd fail to be wise.

Let me close today with a story of something that actually happened a few years back, and then hold up (for each of us) a New Year's challenge. First, the story: a few years back the Air Force built a sophisticated unmanned jet called the Global Hawk. With no pilot aboard, this plane could fly for more than a day, scour terrain and relay video to a ground station (up to) 3000 miles away. It was an incredible jet.

A few years back one of these planes was destroyed in a freak accident. It didn't crash into a mountain. It didn't run out of fuel or have one of its parts malfunction. Instead, it simply committed suicide. It shut its engines down, erased classified material from its computer, set its flaps in a death spiral, and smashed at 400 mph into the desert.

Here's what happened. More than 100 miles away, a team of Air Force personnel were testing a second unmanned Global Hawk jet. At some time in this test, the team told this second plane to terminate its flight. Unfortunately, the first plane "overheard" this signal from more than 100 miles away and thought it was being ordered to terminate its flight, and so it did. A forty-five million dollar plane was lost because it listened to the wrong voice.

There are many journeys we can take in today's world, many voices we can listen to, many stars that we can follow. But only one leads to life. Only one leads to a place that is wise.

And so, here's the challenge. I want to challenge you today (in this New Year) to set out on a journey that is led by God. Set out on a journey where you're no longer the one in control.

Get deep into your faith. Join a Bible study. Spend more time in prayer. Focus more intently, in this coming year, on trying to know and understand God's purpose for your life. Whatever it takes, it doesn't matter. (You decide.) But don't just decide. Do it. Put it into practice. Pay attention. Don't be a fool. Amen.