

**STAR SEARCH**  
**Sermon, January 7, 2018**  
**Epiphany of the Lord**  
**Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-19; Matthew 2:1-12**

I don't know if any of you received a partridge in a pear tree, two turtle doves, three French hens, four calling birds, or five golden rings, but yesterday was the twelfth and final day of Christmas! The twelve days of Christmas are the days from Dec. 25 to Jan. 6. I am told that Epiphany, the twelfth day, is celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox tradition with more vigor than Christmas itself; Epiphany signifies that day when the non-Jewish world became part of the Christmas story (*I like the suggestion of a past colleague who told me he would love to get churches back to the historical commemoration of a twelve day Christmas season that only BEGINS on December 25. Christmas is a momentous event worth savoring and celebrating for days! He would also recommend Christians could save money and exercise better financial stewardship by taking advantage of the post-Christmas sales, buy your presents after December 25, exchange gifts on Epiphany, and donate the money you'd save to the mission of the church! It'll probably never catch on, but it is a great ideal!*). Epiphany is the day we commemorate the revealing of the Messiah to the Gentile world in the arrival of the wise men from the East who followed a star to find a king in the most unlikely of circumstances. They persisted in following the star until they found THE Star, and when they found the true Star of the show they bowed down, worshipped and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The sermon title "Star Search" is a bit of a reach, as are many of my sermon titles ... **Star Search** was a talent competition show, sort of a precursor to **American Idol**, that ran from the early eighties to the mid nineties, hosted by former Johnny Carson sidekick Ed McMahon; the show was also resurrected for a short-lived second run from 2003-2004 hosted by Arsenio Hall. Contestants such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Drew Carey, Rosie O'Donnell and Justin Timberlake all went on to become big stars, but back in the eighties and nineties, the judges on **Star Search** didn't think they had what it took. In 1992, a twelve-year-old Marty Thomas beat out his **Star Search** competitor ... then 11-year-old Britney Spears. Britney Spears first appeared on the show at age ten a year earlier, as did her fellow Mickey Mouse Club member, Christina Aguilera. All of them ... Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Drew Carey, Rosie O'Donnell and Justin Timberlake ... they all lost on the television talent competition show of **Star Search**. But they persisted in following their star; or, if I may mix metaphors, they persisted in the efforts to *be* stars and these early failures only helped them launch their careers.



Now, hold that thought for a few minutes.

Something I've asked the children a few times over the years during the Christmas Eve services, "*Where was the brightest star that first Christmas Eve?*" Hands would shoot up and everyone thought they had the obviously right answer. However, the brightest star that night was not in the sky over Bethlehem; the brightest Star of the show was lying in the manger. The Bible speaks about a Star who will come forth out of Jacob (*as our choir sang earlier*), one who will be known as the Morning Star, the Dayspring ... the latter two terms used to denote the rising of the sun in the morning, dispelling the darkness of night. The prophet Malachi also refers to this star as the Sun of Righteousness rising with healing in his wings, as we sing in the second stanza of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" -- "*Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, Hail the Sun of Righteousness. Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings.*" This Star is the Messiah, the One who will come and dispel the darkness of sin as the sun dispels the darkness of night. This Star is the Light of the World. This is affirmed by Jesus in Revelation 22:16, where we read: "*I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.*" Jesus is the Star of this show, the One who will bring light and life into our world and to our souls.

Hear again the words of Isaiah read earlier: "*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*" That star over Bethlehem had a secondary function, a God-appointed duty ... its purpose was to direct others to the true Star of the show, the Morning Star, the Sun of Righteousness. As I would tell the children those Christmas Eves past, God calls us all to be stars like that star over Bethlehem. That's our role, our duty. By our deeds, by our words, by our lives, by all that we do ... we are to light the way and direct others to the true Star, the Light of the world,

"Your light has come," the prophet says to the people of Israel. On this side of the Old Testament, we now understand and believe Jesus is that Light Who has come into the world to bring light to all people. "... and kings will come to the brightness of His dawn." As also prophesied in Psalm 72, "... all nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed." According to Matthew, the Magi from the East followed the light of a star that was inviting them to Bethlehem to meet the true Star. These mysterious and royal figures come to pay tribute with their worship and with their lavish gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I like the story about the three six-year-old boys playing the role of the wise men in their Sunday School pageant. As they came up to Mary and Joseph, the first one handed over his present and said, "Gold." The second presented his gift and said, "Myrrh." The third one, a little shyer than the other two, presented his gift and stammered "A-a-and Frank sent this."

Matthew's Gospel is bookended by this message ... this Light spoken of by the prophet is for *all* the nations. The Magi were from beyond Israel, they were not part of the Jewish race and culture, and the Lord Jesus is revealed to them as if to underscore that the incarnation is for *all* people. And the gospel ends with Jesus' command, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations ..." This Savior, this Christ in human flesh, is indeed born a Jew, but He is Lord of and for *all* people. This is what we celebrate at Epiphany; this is the symbolic meaning of the wise men's appearance. The light and glory of God has appeared among us and is shining upon us for all of us. In a way, this is our holiday! This is where the Christmas story includes us, the Gentile world Epiphany underscores that what God did in and through Israel in Jesus is for the entire world, for all people, echoing the message of the angel to the shepherds: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Not only do the Magi follow the light of the star to come to the light of the true Star and bow in worship before Him, but in their worship they come bearing gifts, gifts of their wealth. They pour out wealth upon this child who is from a poor family, a family about to become a refugee family driven into Egypt. There is much symbolism in the gifts they bring, but for now I'd like to focus on one remarkable aspect that can be easily overlooked. Think of God's provision in that! The holy family is about to flee to Egypt on a moment's notice because of the treachery of Herod, without the kind of provisions that will help the child survive. How will they make it as refugees? How will Joseph find provision to care for his new family in this foreign land? Well, now they have gold, and valuable frankincense, and precious myrrh ... treasures they may barter for food and shelter. More than likely, the Magi's worshipful giving actually financed the Savior's very survival, thus the very first gifts and offerings given in worship of Jesus Christ become means to ensure the survival of the mission of the Messiah. There's a stewardship sermon in there, in case you missed it ... it is the worshipful giving of those who seek Jesus that continues to ensure the survival of the Messiah's mission to all the nations! Because of the faithful and generous giving of the Magi's very best, we who have encountered the Light sit here in worship this morning thousands of years later.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said to His followers, in so many words, "You are the light of world. If you follow me, you become the light of the world; so let your light shine." By God's design, the light of Jesus Christ shines through His people. His people, who see need and will do what they can to meet it in the name of Jesus. His people, who will bring intervention to human beings who are destitute and hurting, people in physical and spiritual darkness, and in doing so, again light the way for Jesus to be encountered. That's how others know Jesus is present in this world ... because they see and experience the grace of Jesus and the love of God that pours out through the giving and the care and compassion offered to people who are in darkness, difficulty or despair. If we would emulate the wise men and worship Jesus Christ as King of our own lives, then it naturally follows that we will step up and put our wealth and our gifts and our service where our words are. Invest in the mission to carry the light of Jesus Christ to all the world; invest with compassion in people who are hurting, let the light of the world shine on our lives and be reflected in us. In short, be a star.

Last week I mentioned a good resolution for us all to make as we enter 2018, from the pen of nineteenth century Anglican clergymen J. C. Ryle: "Do nothing that you would not like Jesus to see. Say nothing you would not like Jesus to hear. Write nothing you would not like Jesus to read. Go nowhere you would not like Jesus to find you. Read no book of which you would not like Jesus to say, 'Show it to Me.' And never spend your time in such a way that you would not like to have Jesus say, 'What are you doing?'" And in keeping that resolution, you'll be well on your way to biblical stardom. After all, that is our God-given calling, to be stars who help direct others to the only Star that matters.

Of course we will have failures in our attempts at "stardom" ... and I never thought I'd ever use Britney Spears, Rosie O'Donnell, Justin Timberlake or Drew Cary in a sermon as models to emulate ... but keep at it! It is a high and divine calling to be a star. On this day after the twelfth day of Christmas, determine to give God what He most wants most for Christmas: give Him the gift of yourself ... heart, soul, strength and mind ... and resolve to be a star in 2018.