

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

OnStar

Matthew 2:9

They were preparing for a long trip, gathering the essentials, packing, stowing some special gifts, and making sure their transportation was well tuned and ready to go. Their destination was a place they'd never been before but they were excited to be going somewhere exotic and unfamiliar. The air where they lived had turned cold and it would be nice to go someplace where the climate was mild. The stories about the place are what piqued their curiosity and there was one thing in particular they wanted to see. Before leaving there was only one thing left to check: the navigation system, so they would not get lost along the way. It was unconventional and something new. It was a star that guaranteed they'd stay on course. Looking up they saw it, then reaching up to the ceiling console one of them pressed a blue button covered with the symbol of a star. Within a few seconds a voice came out of the sound system asking, "How may I help you?"

When our church staff was considering a theme for this Advent season we batted around a few ideas. We wanted something related to the Star of Bethlehem and the journey of the Magi. Someone suggested "Star Search" but that sounded too much like a Hollywood variety show. Another offering was "Star Trek" but we were afraid people would think more about Spock and Captain Kirk than Mary and Joseph. When we narrowed it down to "OnStar" after the successful navigation and help program installed on all General Motors cars I must admit I still felt we were deciding on a theme that seemed a bit hokey and silly. But then I read a story that opened the doors of my imagination and gave a connection point between The Star of Bethlehem and the phrase "OnStar."

"Louis Morris Jr. of Jackson, Tennessee, had traveled with his choir to a special late-afternoon service about 100 miles south in Ripley, Mississippi. Morris said, 'I wanted to drive my pretty new truck, so I followed people who knew the way.' Getting to Ripley that afternoon didn't pose any problem for the dedicated choir member. However, it was another situation altogether later that night. 'I got lost. I almost panicked and forgot I had On Star.' Instead of heading back toward the Tennessee state line, he ended up on a narrow road in the middle of nowhere. And while Morris had a cell phone, he didn't have service in that particular area. 'Then I thought, I've got On Star,' he said. 'So that's when I hit the button. It was amazing that they knew exactly where I was and told me exactly where to go.' And today he sings its praises."

In one sense the story of the Magi is a lost and found story with their own version of OnStar. Perhaps it wasn't a button they could press, but it was a navigation system they could easily access. Matthew tells us "they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

Like Louis Morris Jr. of Jackson, Tennessee we all have our experiences of those lost journeys. The goal, however, is to turn them into lost and found journeys. Whether it's driving to a far away and unfamiliar place or navigating the twists and turns of faith, we too, need some form of OnStar in our lives. In the Sundays leading up to Christmas we'll be taking a look at what that means.

To begin we need to be realistic. If we want to get somewhere in life...if we are on a mission to find something that carries the promise of significance, it is never as easy as following a star. The first challenge is to notice what would qualify as a star; a guiding and helping light in the first place. Even if it's hanging in front of our eyes there can be obstructions that block the view. Look at Mr. Morris who says when he got lost, he panicked and forgot he had OnStar.

An emotion or reaction such as panic certainly puts on the blinders and isn't that true when it comes to many things? I've talked to students who panic over projects and grades, executives who panic over accountability to shareholders, mothers who panic over the tasks of parenting, and children who panic over whether they'll be accepted by their peers.

And along the lines of "noticing" there is the matter of which star. Luke's Gospel tells us, "*There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars,*" but when it comes to the stars which one will help to keep us on course? Our problem may not be being blinded from the view but confused by the multitude of choices. From the story of the Magi we are told they "*observed the star at its rising*" which suggests that from the multitude of choices they were wise enough to notice the one that was different or promising. Perhaps that can say to us that the task of choosing a star involves some degree of tapping into our own wealth of experience, of trusting our instincts and having faith in our judgment.

Yet even with that the task of following a star remains difficult. Again, from the Magi story we learn that once they set out the star keeps moving. And in our lives it often feels that although we have a handle on the guiding light there are times when it seems as if we're trying to hit a moving target. I've shared the story of La Befana before with some of you; an Italian folk tale about an old woman who brings gifts to good girls and boys on Epiphany – the day recognized as the time when the Magi visited the manger.

The story describes how the Magi, weary from the long journey on the way to Bethlehem stop at the house of Befana to ask for directions. They could still see the star but were confused about the best way to go. The old woman, too concerned with her housework and sweeping, turns them away. She doesn't have time to answer such questions. So the Magi move on along, hopefully headed in the right direction.

A folk tale isn't based on fact, but is grounded in some truth about life. Among other things the story of Befana draws upon the experience that even when it comes to following the proper star times arise when we can become disoriented.

Following the star can be arduous in other ways as well. There was a cartoon this week in one of the papers I read that showed the outlines of what could either be interpreted as Magi with gifts or shoppers with bags. Looking at a bright star hanging in the sky one figure asks, "What's that?" The other answers, "Hopefully a light to the next sale." This makes me think that the cartoonist was suggesting we can use the right star for the wrong purposes. In the verses that come just before our scripture Herod, the King of the Jews, feels threatened over all the prophecies that his successor has been born. When he asks his religious advisors where the child is they quote scripture, "*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.*"ⁱⁱ

So Herod arranges a meeting with the Magi and "*learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also pay him homage.'*"ⁱⁱⁱ Using the right star for the wrong reasons won't get us anywhere at all for after visiting the manger they are warned in a dream not to return to the king and leave by another road. Herod comes up short.

Another challenge in following the star is that we can get lost if we simply rely on following others who claim to know the way. Remember our friend Louis Morris Jr. who is traveling from Jackson, Tennessee to Ripley, Mississippi saying "I followed people who knew the way." But heading home he didn't have that luxury and wound up stranded on a country road. Something similar happened to Befana. Not long after the Magi left she came to her senses and dashed out in search of them to join the procession to the manger. Oblivious to the star she relied on finding and following those she believed knew the way and to this day is still searching for the Magi. While the help and experience of others is certainly important so is the need to look up and connect with the star ourselves.

We've been talking about what can contribute to the lost part of the equation. Let's end with what can move it from a lost to a lost and found journey. For the Magi that moment comes when the star stops moving, positioning itself clearly and boldly over the manger. To me that speaks to both the uniqueness and difficulty of faith; the

magi could control a lot of things, preparing for the trip, choosing the star, following the path, but in the end there was one thing they had no control over whatsoever, the movement and final position of the star. That part involved a leap of faith that God was guiding them toward what he wanted them to see and where he wanted them to go.

As people who want and need to be in control, that may be the big lesson of Advent and of faith; to understand that following the star means opening ourselves to what God wants us to see and where God intends us to be in life. If we can do that perhaps our journey will mirror that of the Magi who upon seeing that the star had stopped were, as Matthew put it, “overwhelmed with joy!”

ⁱ From OnStar Website, direct quote.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 2:6

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 2:7-8