

# **Choose a Star; Then Follow It**

The Day of Epiphany

January 6, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

Depending on whether you want the document to be the "custom," "standard," or "deluxe" version, you can spend \$54, \$97 or \$139 through the International Star Registry to name one of stars in the heavens after a loved one, receive (or send a loved one) a letter of congratulations that includes a sky chart with your star circled in red. It isn't said, but I suspect the attraction to this program is to grasp a sense of eternity, perhaps put a claim to something immortal and immutable. I suppose if one can't have ones fifteen minutes of fame here on earth as a star or even superstar, at least you can have your name attached to a star in the heavens.

With our younger disciples, we spoke of the one to whom the magi went – the one, to use the term coined by Tim Rice and Norman Jewison when they called Jesus Christ the *Superstar*. We acknowledge in today's world that to speak of a "star" is not just about one of those wonderful little lights in the sky and not even the brilliant one that shone over where Jesus was born in Bethlehem; that there are the "stars of tomorrow," the stars of Hollywood and the would-be stars who want the privilege of going to Washington to govern and rule in Congress or from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

When I looked at the title of this sermon, selected early last month when the Harbinger "went to press," I am left to wonder what I was thinking, because if I could rename it, it would be "Which Star do You Follow?" because our words and actions usually and already demonstrate pretty clearly where our priorities lie. However, it is our task to ever challenge those priorities – and in so doing, maybe, just maybe, we will then set our eyes on a different star, indeed on the Superstar of all time, the one whose birth was so significant that magi from the east traveled far to witness the blessed event and bring precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Last month, in a sermon about joy that invited us to take a hard look at the priorities we choose, I took exception to a mother who spent \$1800 in order to secure four tickets to the Rochester Hannah Montana show. While we might recognize the appeal of the young star that portrays the young singer, there is something to be said for challenging the mania that seems to surround this new phenomenon. I concluded with the suggestion that maybe this mother did other things for her daughter that belied my complaint. Little did I know that someone paying \$1800 for four tickets would be mild in comparison to the news of this last week as it related to concerts starring this young lady. Quoting from press releases: "a Chicago based retail store, Club Libby Lu," ... ran an essay contest in which the winner would receive a trip to Albany ... for a sold out Hannah Montana concert on January 9, 2008. The winner ... shared in her essay how her father died in Iraq this year." Unfortunately, there was a problem. When someone checked with the Department of Defense, it turns out the story was a complete fabrication. When challenged, the mother of the child, a Priscilla Ceballos "admitted to the lie" claiming "we did what we could to win."

There are a number of issues here - clearly one is that of integrity - of simple truth telling - and the consequences of a disclosure that reveals an out and out lie. And, in today's world of all the more instant communication and videography, how can anyone think they are going to get away with anything that is "out there" in the public?

Three thousand years ago, David thought he could get away with his hi-jinks with Bathsheba and it fell to the prophet Nathan to confront the King. Today, in a world of you-tube, cell phones that take streaming video and all of the other mechanisms to record any and all events - do people really think they aren't going to have their words and actions parsed and scrutinized for even the simplest error in veracity? Every single presidential candidate - yes, every single one, has been caught in an exaggeration, misrepresentation of facts - or downright contradiction from something they previously said or announced.

What is going on here? In the case of the essay contest, one can watch an internet video of the mother claiming there was no intent to deceive. Let's see, her daughter writes an essay about her father dying in Iraq when her father is not only alive but never served in the military. No intent to deceive? The need to see a "star" was so compelling that the family lost all touch with integrity? Effort went into that essay and the little girl knew it was a fabrication. We blame the mother, but where was the instruction in the family, at school, in a church community that suggested that little bells should have been going off in the little girl's head that at a minimum meant asking the question: why are we writing a lie? It comes as no surprise that another upshot of this fraudulent essay is an implicit disrespect for all of those men and women who *have* fought, been injured and died in Iraq and Afghanistan, indeed in all strife and war.

One is left to wonder if lies and deception now rule of the day! We are reminded of how Herod was intentional, deliberate, scheming, lying, - even asking the magi to be *diligent* in their search so that he, Herod, might also worship this little child. Herod was so determined that his "star" continue to shine, that he lost what little sense he had left of right and wrong, good and evil. The consequence of Herod's bad choice puts his name - particularly in light of the subsequent murder of innocent children in Bethlehem - ... put Herod's name right up there in history with the likes of Nero, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Idi Amin and Osama ben Laden.

As we commence a new year, we all have that annual opportunity to reset our set of priorities. I don't mean resolutions to lose weight, exercise more - or whatever may indeed be best for our physical health. Instead, I speak of those resolutions that might be good for our spiritual health - as we set our eyes on what is worthy of our praise and honor.

My daughter, Laura, whom Sally and I visit this coming weekend in Massachusetts - Laura, as a youngster of nine or ten, gave me letter grades after every sermon. The first grade was for whether my sermon had *anything* to do with the title, usually named weeks before. I recalled that as I pondered the title for this morning's sermon. In the end, I *do* have it right - because as much as our actions tell the world about our priorities and our behavior is suggestive of what we consider worthy of "stardom," we always have a choice. Isaiah announced: "Arise, shine, for your light has come." The magi traveled to Bethlehem to follow a star so that they might see the incarnate gift of God. We gather in this place to renew our faith, remember the star that draws us to the Superstar and be challenged in the ways of integrity, grace, justice and truth.

Amen.