

MOVED BY THE MANGER - MAGI
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 2:1-12
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2018
10:00 a.m.

Author Tom Long speaks of how when he was a child,

“There was a game we would play in our neighbourhood

to pass the time on rainy afternoons.

It was a game of the imagination,

and if it had a name, which I don't think it did,

it would have been called,

‘Where Would You Leave The Treasure?’

The idea was this:

Suppose you had a large amount of money,

a treasure really,

but some unexpected crisis has come up, and suddenly

you have to leave the treasure with someone for safekeeping.

You can't put it in the bank

or bury it under the oak tree in the back yard –
there isn't time.

The rule of the game is that you have to entrust it to someone,
some human being.

Whom would you choose?"

He says, "The fun of the game, of course,
was sitting around in a circle
and exploring all the character flaws
and virtues of the various possibilities,
in the search for a trustworthy person.

'How about the school principal?' someone would suggest.

'Nah, he'd probably steal it.'

'Well, how about the preacher?'

'Too risky. He'd probably put it in the collection plate.'

'Okay then, what about your sister?'

'Are you kidding? She'd want to split it!'

And on it would go,

the search for just the right person to keep the treasure.

In the mind of a child, the stakes were high:

your whole treasure

risked on something as fragile

as the trustworthiness of another human being.”

Long points out that one way to look at the Christmas story,

is a divine version of

‘Where would you leave the treasure?’

God was searching for some place in human life

with whom to leave his treasure.

But in God’s case, the treasure was not wealth, or power,

or prestige or glory,

it was himself.

Instead of a treasure map, he provided with the treasure

a star.

We don’t typically think about following a star.

We follow our instincts.

We follow our dreams.

We follow a plan.

But unless you are a sailor from hundreds of years ago,

or one of those ones

that likes to navigate in a classical fashion

most of us typically don't follow a star.

We follow our instincts.

We follow our dreams.

We follow a plan.

We wish on a star.

It's the theme song for the most magical place on earth.

When you wish upon a star

Makes no difference who you are

Anything your heart desires

Will come to you.

Like a bolt out of the blue

Suddenly, it comes to you
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true

We wish on a star.

We wish on a star

so that whatever we dream can come to be.

We wish on a star so that what we want will come to us
like a bolt out of the blue.

But we don't typically let a star lead us.

We don't typically follow a star.

When the magi, the wise men

came from the east to bring their gifts to Jesus,

while they began by following the star,

they also were following their own plan and assumptions.

They went to where they thought the treasure would be.

They went straight to Jerusalem.

They went to Jerusalem because it was big, capital, palatial and regal
expectations and assumptions ultimately lead them there.

When they arrived they asked,

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?”

We have seen his star in the east.

We’ve come to worship him.”

We have wished on the star.

The existing King, Herod was a disturbed man to begin with,

but he was further disturbed by this news.

He was infamous for executing anyone he thought

was a threat to his throne.

He certainly wanted to know who this “new king” was.

He called together the scholars and chief priests and asked where

the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Saviour,

was to be born.

Bethlehem in Judea.

Bethlehem.

God placed the treasure

in rural, dusty, hidden, unnoticed and unpretentious – Bethlehem.

The wise men missed their target.

They wished on the star.

They didn't follow the star to the end

They needed to be six miles to the south of their expectations

six miles to the south of big, capital, palatial, regal Jerusalem.

The Messiah was in small, provincial, unremarkable Bethlehem.

So instead of wishing on the star,

and following their assumptions and expectations,

they changed their approach and

followed the star again

And so, they were led to the child,

and saw the Messiah.

We wish for God in high places.

We think that God dwells in big, capital, palatial, regal moments.

So we go looking for those moments.

If we have those moments,

we think God has favoured us with treasure,

and placed his treasure with us.

We shape God into an idol of the place where dreams come true.

We make God the one who grants wishes.

So we think following our assumptions and expectations that in

that in the promotion,

that in the windfall,

that in the wedding,

that in the recognition,

that is there we'll find the promise

that it is there we'll find the Messiah.

But if you wish on a star,

instead of follow the star,

you'll be off by about six miles.

The Messiah is found in small, in provincial,

in somewhat unremarkable everyday Bethlehem.

God placed his treasure in Bethlehem.

Follow the star and you'll find the Saviour in Bethlehem.

You'll find the Saviour in the small, in the provincial,

in the unremarkable, and in the everyday,
You'll find the Saviour in things you say or do
for your parents, or your kids, or your spouse,
or your friend, or your co-worker, or your neighbour.

Follow the star to the small, provincial, unremarkable and everyday world
of how you manage yourself,
how you manage your anger, your pride, and your selfishness;
how you manage your generosity, your kindness, your patience.

Follow the star and you'll find the Saviour in Bethlehem.

In the small, provincial, unremarkable and everyday world,
that is where God hides his treasure of a life
with the Messiah

Follow the star.

Don't wish on the big dream,
the capital expectation,
the palatial aspiration.

Follow the star to Bethlehem.

When the wise got to Bethlehem,

they did something else quite unexpected.

There in small, provincial, unremarkable Bethlehem,
where things were humble, not impressive
they bowed.

Where or to what or to whom do you bow?

Or when was the last time you actually bowed to someone?

or curtsied?

Unless you were onstage,

or at square dance,

the answer is probably never.

We are a handshake culture.

Eye to eye, hand to hand, with firm strength,

one equal to the other.

We don't typically bow, defer, honour another.

The wise bowed.

When was the last time you willingly deferred to another,

took a figurative bow and said,

I will put my claim to the side and honour you on this?

Or did you and your spouse have

a rocking fight in the aisle of the hardware store

about which kind Christmas lights to buy, and who was right?

If you watch any sort of public debate,

if you saw another person defer, honour, respect, listen,
you'd be shocked.

That person would likely be called a weak individual.

When was the last time you took a figurative bow,

set aside your assumptions and expectations and admitted,

'You know what officer you are right, I was going too fast.

Thank you for doing your part in keeping us all safe,
even if it means I'm the one paying the ticket today.'

Or did you take down her badge number and say

'I'll be in touch with your supervisor.'

When was the last time you took a figurative bow,

to lean in and down toward,

the treasure of Christ present in another,

in the small, provincial and at times unremarkable everyday
and everyday people.

Present in your child, in your child's teacher,
in your student, your employee, your colleague,
your client, your patient, your spouse

When was the last time you took a figurative bow,
to follow the star
to lean in and kneel down
and see the treasure.

Or did you simply expect God to conform,
and line up to your assumptions, and your expectations,
and what you want.

Are you wishing on the star,
or following the star?

We don't typically bow.

We advocate.

We articulate.

We argue.

We wish and demand.

We prefer to be our own authority, our own boss.

We don't follow.

No king bows to another king,

a handshake maybe, but certainly not a bow.

Knowing this makes King Herod sound so exceedingly suspicious
in our Scripture passage.

A new king is a threat to the old king.

Herod told the wise men to make a careful search for the child,
then report back to him,
so he could, get this, 'Also go and worship him.'

You need to know this is the same Herod,

who executed two of his wives

two of his brothers-in-law

and three of his very own sons

because of their challenge and threat to his kingship.

I'll go and worship him too.

As I said, he was disturbed.

I don't think bowing and worshipping the newborn king
was what was really on his mind.

Because you know,

we don't bow to what threatens our personal kingdoms.

We don't bow.

We don't want to lose face,

or give up power,

or be seen as weak or subservient,

or sacrifice our pride.

And I suppose that's one way to go through life.

The Bible calls it stiff-necked.

Refusing to bend.

It goes with words like tight, rigid, fearful, anxious, angry, hard.

No king or queen bows to another king.

That is Herod's way.

The wise, followed the star they had seen in the east,

until it stopped over the place where the child was.

There, where the child was, they were overjoyed.

Where the child was was where their joy was.

They were before God's treasure.

They went in.

They saw the child with his mother Mary.

They bowed down and they worshipped him.

Then they opened their treasures and present him with gifts
of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

It was every part a royal visit.

In small, provincial, unremarkable, everyday Bethlehem,
the wise bowed.

And that is the way of the wise.

They don't wish on the star.

They follow it.

They don't acquire treasure,

but share it.

They give deference, and respect and love
to the one who came to save.

Coming to you as a baby,
in a manger, in humility,
the Lord has placed the treasure of himself with you.
The Lord has deferred to you in making that first move.

We are prone to wishing on a star,
to following after our own expectations and assumptions.
But there is another way to move through this life.
It doesn't have to be Herod's way
It is following the star, to the small, provincial unremarkable places,
where God will be found
and there, on a knee before the King of kings,
following, honouring and deferring to the one
whose love endures forever,
whose mercy is eternal,
whose peace is everlasting
whose joy never fails,
and finding God's treasure there

To follow the star and bow before the Lord in Bethlehem

is to bend oneself in close to
the King and Saviour who brings love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control to our lives.

And so

If you are on a journey to find God,
to worship and honour God,
beware that you are not following
your own assumptions and expectations
carrying with you a gift you think you need to bring to God
in order to have him defer to your wish.

You may think you need to bring

a life that is in order,

thoughts that are sorted out,

questions that are answered,

relationships that are healthy,

a career on track,

an Achilles heel that has been healed.

You'll be tempted to head over to Jerusalem to meet the newborn king,

where things are powerful and prestigious and regal.

You'll be off by about six miles.

God placed his treasure, his Son,

in the rural, the dusty, the hidden,

the unnoticed and the unpretentious.

If you are looking to find God,

you will find him

in the less than glamorous places in your life.

You will need to journey

six miles south of the power and prestige,

the expectations and assumptions of Jerusalem.

Upon arrival, not only do the wise

not show signs of disappointment or dissatisfaction,

the passage says they rejoiced with an exceedingly great joy.

Which of course is how it is, and how it will be,

when you find God's treasure, God's son

when you follow him to the place you don't expect.

The wise simply gave to God,

what they had been carrying with them.

Which is exactly the perfect gift for this kind of king.

Follow the star to Bethlehem.

Make your way to the child this Christmas season.

Bow. Take a knee.

It is the perfect position from which to see God's treasure,

to see the one in the manger,

the one whose love for you is so great he gave himself,

our greatest treasure

Follow the star.

Amen.