

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday after Christmas  
January 3, 2010

## **The Beauty of a Calling**

Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

We are now a little over 11 hours into the third day  
of the New Year, 2010.

How's it going?

How are you entering the New Year?

As a child of about 10 years old,  
and very much into science fiction and space fantasies,  
I was quite certain that by the year 2010  
I would be flying to work in some sort of spacecraft  
like George Jetson.

Well, I got to work this morning thoroughly grounded on 4 wheels,  
in a 10 year old car with a headlamp out that needs to be replaced,  
Nonetheless, the world in which we live is at least a fascinating and beautiful  
as the imagined world of my early starlit fantasies.

Today we have read the sacred texts of Epiphany,  
ancient words that draw our eyes  
both to the stars  
and to the reality of the world around us.

These words call us into the New Year with a sense of expectation.

How are you entering the New Year?

Do you sense this expectation in your life?

Or do you enter these days as if nothing is really new?

Or with a feeling of disorientation, or heaviness or even dread  
of what is to come in the days ahead?

Or do you enter the New Year with purpose, and clarity, and a sense of calling?

Just as the Magi were called to follow the Star,  
and just as Paul was commissioned to be a servant of the gospel,  
so the words we have heard today *call us* into the New Year.



First, let's consider the Magi and the Star of Bethlehem.

Do you know who these Magi were?

The *magoi* were Zoroastrian fire-priests from Persia, to the East of Israel.  
They believed in the universal unity of humankind under a supreme deity,  
to whom they gave the name Ashura Mazda.

Zoroastrians anticipated the coming of a Great Savior  
who would finally overcome every evil power in the world

and would unite all humanity in a single Kingdom of Righteousness.

Zoroastrian priests would read the night sky as we would read a book.  
Their readings of the stars were not so much predictions of the future  
as they were proclamations of what was coming to pass in the present.  
These horoscopes told of the destiny of nations and cities and kings -  
in those days horoscopes weren't for the average Joe reading the newspaper,  
but pertained to the life and movement of great peoples and their leaders.

These Magi followed what Matthew calls an *astera*, or an aster,  
which could have been a star, an alignment of planets,  
or, most likely, a comet.

In ancient times,  
when a comet passed over a region,  
it was seen as a portent of great political disturbance,  
most likely a regime change  
so we can understand why Herod and Jerusalem  
would have been troubled by the rising of this star.

And here's a fascinating thing:

For these Magi to have associated this aster with Judea,  
it would have to have appeared in the constellation which,  
according to ancient astrology,  
governed the geographic region of Judea.

This constellation was Aries,  
the springtime constellation,  
considered (get this!)  
the first-created, or first-born of the constellations,  
also known as the celestial...Lamb of God.

The fact that the star appeared in the springtime,  
also would have meant it was the dry season,  
allowing for nighttime travel.

And so these *magoi*,  
seeking an ultimate sovereign, an earthly king of divine origin,  
who would unite all humanity in a single glorious kingdom,  
follow this star, this aster, this planetary convergence, this comet,  
to the region of Judea, to the town of Bethlehem,  
to the makeshift cradle of Mary and Joseph's son.

The Magi, Zoroastrian fire-priests, were called on a journey of great anticipation,  
a journey of profound and beautiful hope for the world.

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Fast forward now to Paul,  
who also has been called to go on a journey.  
His journey has led him to the dark confines of a prison;  
but even this suffering has not caused him to lose heart.  
He knows that he is imprisoned for a cause of ultimate significance.

He is in chains because he is carrying out the commission he has received from God  
to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ,  
to make known his understanding of the mystery of Christ,  
not just for his own people, the people of Israel,  
but for the Gentiles, as well.

Gentiles: for example, Zoroastrian fire-priests who follow astrological signs.

Gentiles: as in, everyone else who is not Jewish.

Gentiles: as in, you and me.

This mystery given to Paul, an Israelite Pharisee converted to the gospel of Christ,  
now reaching out to the Gentiles with the faith of Christ,  
is the very same mystery of the Magi,  
the Zoroastrian fire-priest astrologers,  
who sought out a newborn Judean King,  
as the culmination of their religious hopes.

It is a beautiful mystery, a glorious reality,  
that is revealed to the world in the birth child of Bethlehem.

Revealed to those  
who are given eyes to see  
and ears to hear.

And Paul has heard the call to be a servant of this new reality,  
as he writes in Ephesians...  
*to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,  
and to bring to light what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God  
who created all things;  
so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety  
might now be made known...*

The beauty and grandeur of this language is fitting,  
given the universal scope of Paul's calling.



Several times now,  
I have described the message of Christmas as beautiful,  
for so it is.

The Light that Dawns at the Epiphany,  
is a beautiful light that calls us forward into life -  
and not just any life,  
but our particular lives at this time and place  
in the unfolding of God's eternal mystery.

Like the Magi, who journeyed far from their homes to seek the kingdom of God,  
like Paul who journeyed far from his home to share the gospel of Christ,  
***we are called on a journey***  
in which we seek the new reality that God has set forth in Christ.

I discovered just this week  
that the Greek word for beauty is *kallos*,

and is derived from the same root as the verb *kaleo*  
which means "to be called by name"  
or "to be called, summoned, invited"  
or sometimes "to be called together."

There is profound beauty in a calling.

There is divine beauty in a life lived with divine purpose.

It is the beauty of the Star of Bethlehem,

the beauty of the Child who was born and laid in a feeding trough,  
the beauty of a heart that rejoices in the presence of God in our midst,  
the beauty of Immanuel, God with us,  
the beauty of all humankind, united in a universal fellowship  
gathered together in Christ.

It may be that you are called forward into this New Year  
to pursue your calling in a particular line of work -

a banker, a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a builder, an artist,  
a businessman or woman, an attorney, a public servant,  
a parent, or child, or sister or brother,  
a volunteer, a friend...

These are roles God has surely called us to play. Gifts God has given us to use.  
And when we use them well, and with love and justice,  
there is God-given beauty in these callings.

But in all of these roles, all of these particular callings,  
there is a deeper calling that beckons us forward:  
to show forth the wisdom of God in all its rich variety,  
to proclaim the mystery of God in Christ,  
the Savior of the world.

So rejoice and be glad in this new year  
that you have good news to share - *the* good news.

Give praise to God, whose mysterious plan for the fullness of time  
is always at work - sometimes in darkness and in a hidden way -  
but always unfolding  
as God reconciles us all to himself  
and to one another.

That is the mystery of the Incarnation,  
the reality we are about celebrate at this Table,  
the Beauty of our Calling in this world.

In gratitude to God, let us keep the feast.