

Sermon for Sunday, December 5, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"WHEN FOLLOWING A STAR LANDS YOU IN A STABLE"
St. Matthew 2:1-12

According to tradition and according to implications in the New Testament the three wise men were very well to do. After all, we are told that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We don't know what sort of cities they came from, but since Jerusalem itself was a very modest city without any particular grandeur, we may assume that surely they had come from far grander places and had passed through other cities with much more to offer. Yet, when they arrived at this simple town of Jerusalem, even their hopes about this place were dashed for they were referred to a very primitive, simple little village a few miles away called Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the star led them right on past even the humble inn the hamlet had to offer. At last the star stood over a stable and they had arrived at their destination.

Can you imagine how they must have felt? Put yourself in their places. You are a person of reputation in your own country and a person of considerable means. You are a religious leader and you are called wise. And here you are with perhaps months of travel behind you, following a star that you know in your heart leads you to great and exciting things. God has revealed to you that when you have followed that star to journey's end, you will find a miracle awaiting you. Now, at last, the journey is over. What do you find for your vision from God, for your months of travel, for your anticipation and hope? Why, only the crudest of stables, a simple carpenter, a peasant maid--and a new-born baby. Here all your dreams and hopes come to an end. Following a star has landed you in a stable.

You know, we have dramatized and romanticized and idealized that stable scene to the point that we forget what it must have been like really. Have you smelled a stable lately? Or walked through a barnyard lately? (Someone has asked, "How do you walk through a barnyard?" And the answer is "Very Carefully.") And those lovely little lambs--have you ever smelled a sheep? In the old days of the west when cattlemen fought the sheepherders, the cowboys claimed--with considerable justification--that they could smell a sheep man for miles. Then there are the cows! We sing, "The cattle are lowing..." Back when I was a kid in rural Mississippi, at school we could always tell which of the boys had milked the cow that morning!

I really don't mean to be facetious or to make light of something holy, but I want you to understand very clearly where following a star landed those wise men! And what do you do when following a star lands you in some stable?

Well, let me suggest first that if you find that following a star lands you in some stable the first thing that you ought to do is re-examine that star! For example, there was Herod who was following the wrong star. He wanted to go down in history as one of the greatest rulers that Israel had ever had. So, when it seemed that some rival to that claim--some baby born to be king of the Jews--appeared on the scene, he set out to destroy that rival. Since he couldn't be sure who the child was, he killed all the children under two in the entire area. Neither history nor the Bible hail him as a great king, but a bloodthirsty killer of children. He followed the wrong star and landed in a stable.

Or again there was the Bethlehem Inn Keeper. He had the chance to go down in biblical history with the greatest names in the world. But he was following the wrong star and the Bible does not even record his name. Or take Judas - historians and scholars generally agree that in all probability, he was following the star of political revolution and he betrayed Jesus to force him to lead a revolt. But it

was the wrong star and he landed in a dreadful stable.

What star are you following this morning? Some of us are following the star of financial success. Some are following the star of professional success; some are following the star of self-gratification. Yes, we are following all kinds of stars this morning. But the question I would like to ask is this: where will following your star land you?

I suspect many of us this morning are following the wrong star. Imagine in your mind that there is a star out in front of you that you are following. What is that star for you? Where will it land you? Is it really worth following? Is your star worth committing your life to?

But having said all of that, let me go on to point out that even following the right star and the best star may very well land you in some stable. And that was exactly what happened to the three wise men. I'm sure that when they arrived in Bethlehem and found themselves at the stable, they reconsidered or recalculated to determine if they had misjudged. Yet, the fact is, they had indeed followed the right star. They were exactly where God had brought them. What do you do when you have followed some star to the best of your ability, when you know that it is the star God has given you, and still you find yourself in some stable?

Our scripture for this morning tells us three things the wise men did when following their star landed them in a stable. Let me share them with you. First...the Bible tells us, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy..." Have you ever stopped to think how incredible that is? After the months of travel, the hardships endured, to arrive at a stable - and yet to enter it with exceeding joy? And how could they do that? Because they knew that somehow God was in their stable.

That is something we can be sure of! If we are following God's star for our lives and find ourselves in some stable, we can be sure that God will be in it. Isn't that what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "everything works together for good to them that love God"? And St. Paul wrote, "Rejoice always". He wrote, "In all things give thanks". He could say that because he knew that we would always find God in the stable.

I know there are some of you here this morning who had tried as best you could to follow God, to be the man or woman He wanted you to be. And I know you have suffered greatly - sometimes life seems to have simply fallen in on you - and you have landed in some dreadful stable of life. But I want to say to you that you can rejoice, because you will find God in your stable. He is working his purposes out in your life. Some day you will be able to look back on that stable experience and you will know that God was there.

Over in the 12th chapter of Hebrews the writer speaks of Jesus and he says, "...who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame..." Yes, out there in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus found himself at one of life's stables. Yet, he could enter into that experience, he could go to the cross, with joy because he knew God was in that stable. And that is why he could pray that day, "thy will be done".

The second thing the wise men did when they found themselves at a stable was to give their very best to God. The Bible puts it this way, "...they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasurers, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." Yes, they gave their best to God.

Most of us come to bad places in life, smelly stables of human experience. Our problem isn't that we may experience more than our share of disappointments and failures, more than our share of life's stable experiences. No, our problem is that we don't always give our best to God. Some months ago I read the biography of William Booth, a preacher in England in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1865 Booth began to preach, but his congregation was found in the slums of London. They were the dregs of human society who would have never entered a church. Yet, there in those dreadful circumstances, William Booth gave his very best to God. Out of his ministry came the Salvation Army, one of the truly great ministries in the world today to the poor, the down-and-out, the needy - all those with whom the rest of society does not wish to be bothered. When he found himself in a terrible stable of life, William Booth gave his very best to God.

In my own life there have been times when things went badly for me. So often the temptation is to whine and carp and complain. Yet, the wise men - in the stable where life had landed them - gave their very best to God. I have a friend down in Texas - she is far up in her 80's now. Several years ago she wrote me to tell me of her problems. Her eyesight, her hearing, were failing - she had become bedfast. Yet, from her bed she became a great prayer warrior for God. When she found herself in the stable of old age and infirmity, still she gave her very best to God. If there is any one lesson we can learn from the wise men, it is this - when you find yourself in some stable, give God your very best.

The third thing we learn from the wise men who followed a star and landed in a stable is this: from the stables you can mark out new directions for life. Do you remember what the Bible said about them? "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way." Yes, they charted a new direction for their lives. That's the way it is with stables. You see, if your star leads you to some stable in life, when you believe that you will find God in that stable - that you will find his will and purpose for your life; when you give him your best in that stable, then God will always give new directions, new courses, to your life.

I suspect there are many of us here this morning who need a new sense of direction, a new sense of purpose, a new course for our lives. You see, that is why this first Christmas is called good news. It took a stable and transformed it into the salvation of the world.

How about your life this morning? If you are not finding the happiness you hoped for, the peace you want, it may be that you need a new sense of direction this morning. You can find that for your life today. You can come to the stable where the Christmas star stands over it. In that stable you will find God. Give him your best - give Him your life - and He will give you a new sense of direction, a new purpose. You see, that's what the wise men did when following a star landed them in a stable. This Christmas season, when the star stands over the stable, in it you will find Jesus - give Him your best - your life; and He will give you a new direction.