

“Star of Wonder”
Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2008
Rev. Jeff Allen

Shooting stars. Comets. The movement of planets in the sky. These things have fascinated people from the dawn of time. We love a night when the sky is clear, the night is dark, we're away from the glare of the lights of the city, and we can witness the evening shower of shooting stars in a moonless night. People have always been fascinated about what happens above us in the heavens.

One of the most familiar phenomenons to us is Haley's comet. Every seventy-six years, Haley's comet comes speeding by the earth. In 1910, it came within 14 million miles of the earth and it was unusually bright in the sky that year. Normally, Haley's comet is 40 million miles from earth, but in 1910, it was only 14 million miles away from us, lighting up the sky each night with brilliant clarity. People anticipated the coming of Haley's comet and watched the night sky.

Seventy-six years later, in 1986, the world was a much smaller place. The best place on earth to witness Haley's comet was determined to be in Australia and New Zealand, so many people travelled across the miles to witness the miracle in the skies. Every motel room down under was sold out. So many rooms were in demand that the government appealed to citizens to rent out their homes to tourists to come and see the magnificent site of Haley's comet (and of course, spend their money in Australia). The tourist boats were filled, the luxury liners, each with their resident astronomer. You could travel with none other than Carl Sagan, the world's foremost astronomer, for a mere \$8,000, and listen to brilliant lectures about the comet's tail some 40 million miles away. Yes, people past and present have been fascinated about comets and shooting stars and signs in the heavens.¹

We encounter individuals such as these in our Gospel text today. We read the story of the wise men from the east who followed a star in search of the King of the Jews. Our opening hymn this morning calls this star a “star of wonder.” People have wondered about this star since the time Matthew's Gospel was written. In the past century, people have worked to apply modern science in their effort to figure out exactly what the astronomical phenomenon was that would have created such a star. Several theories have arisen.

Some say that this “star of wonder” was simply a meteor shower. Some say it was a comet, possibly even Haley's Comet. Others say it was a planet, maybe Venus, Jupiter, Saturn or even Uranus. Other theories say it was a coming together of more than one planet. One popular theory incorporates the meaning that people during Biblical times gave to the planets. It says that the star was a meeting of the planet Jupiter, which was thought to be the king of the heavens and the planet Saturn which was thought to be the protector of Israel. In Biblical times, the occurrence of a star, comet or constellation was often associated with the birth of a notable person. Thus, it seems obvious to some that the wise men, knowing the meaning of Jupiter and Saturn concluded that this particular star indicated that a king was born to protect Israel.

¹ Much of the beginning of this sermon is adapted from “Shooting Stars” by Edward F. Markquart found at http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_shootingstars.htm, accessed January 5, 2008.

Now, I have to admit that these theories fascinate me. I took an astronomy class in college, and it's one of those classes that I regret not paying more attention to. It might help me understand the theories that I have read about the star a little bit better. But as I was playing with these theories this week, I realized something quite important.

The fun I was having looking at all these theories was only serving to distract me from the point of the story! So let's get back to the basics. The basic information of the story is this: a group of men saw something that led them to seek out a deeper truth – a truth that was worth making a sacrifice to discover, and a truth that changed the course of their lives, sending them home by a different way.

This, I think, is the basic building block of any story of faith. We seek a deeper truth. Something or someone leads us to an encounter or experience that changes us. We may have to make a sacrifice along the way. Our life continues after the event or experience, but down at least a slightly different path.

I have had many experiences of this in my own life. One in particular stands out. About 8 or 9 years ago, I started to get a little more serious about my faith. I had heard about a spiritual retreat called the “Walk to Emmaus” that several people from my church had attended, and I was intrigued. I was a little unsure about what it might entail, and I had to sacrifice a vacation day from work to attend. While I was there, I learned about and experienced in new and powerful ways God's deep, unconditional love just for me. I was absolutely changed by that experience. It was during that retreat that I answered my call to ministry and began the process that has led me to this place today. Yes, I would say that I went home on a different road.

A man I know named Tom shared one of his experiences with me. He was planning to attend a Promisekeepers event in Detroit. There were some extra tickets to the event, so someone, it might have even been his church, encouraged him to take with him a man who was struggling with drug or alcohol addiction, and so Tom did. While they were at the event, both men had an experience of God that led them to a new commitment of faith. While they were driving the three hours on their way home, they discussed their future. The man who struggled with addiction shared that he had little hope that he would be able to maintain the new commitment of faith he had made because of the pressures he faced back in his normal environment. Tom was concerned about him, and couldn't get his situation out of his mind. So Tom put together some resources, and bought some property in Vinton County with the intention of providing a place where men could go, away from the pressures of the environments that were leading them to a life of drug or alcohol abuse. The men could stay for as long as they needed to get clean and sober, and they were offered opportunities to deepen their faith along the way. This ministry Tom created is now called “The Refuge” and is Tom's full-time job. Tom was led to an encounter with God, and the road of his life is not the same as it was before that encounter.

The truth is that we are all on a journey. Not everyone has a story as dramatic or life-changing as mine or Tom's, but many do. Each of us has the story of today. Something has drawn you to this place this morning. Maybe it's a hunger for some deeper spiritual truth. Maybe it's a hunger to experience the truth of community available here. And maybe it's simply because

church is part of your Sunday routine. Even if it is just routine for you, my prayer is that through your presence here today, and any time you come to this place, you might come, seeking an encounter with God and expecting that it might transform your life.

I believe that our deepest hope when we involve ourselves in things of faith is that we would truly experience God and have the opportunity for true change. All too often that hope gets buried in the routine of life. But what if... What if we transformed that hope that is buried deep into an on-the-surface expectation? What if we gave up saying, "Gee, it would be nice if that happened" and started saying "This is what I expect to happen, and so I'm going to look for it, and I'm going to make a sacrifice to help it happen!"

Friends, this is what faith is all about. Following the signs that we see that point us to God, whether they be stars in the sky, the visible affects of faith we see in others lives, the promises of scripture, an advertisement in the paper, the lyrics of a song, or even a bumper sticker or t-shirt. The signs of God at work are out there, and are leading us to encounters with God. Encounters that help us understand the deeper truths of life. Encounters that give us hope to get through the day, even if it is just this one day. Encounters that may take a bit of sacrifice on our part, but encounters that will lead to the change that we long for.

My prayer is that something happens while you are here today that would send you home by a different way, whether it be a slight detour or whether you throw the whole map away and rely entirely on God's guidance.