

"PURPOSEFUL LIVING"

January 6, 1991

TEXT: Matthew 2:9 "When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. "

Today is Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, so I chose for this morning's scripture that well known story of the Magi. Two weeks ago, if we thought about the Magi at all, we might have pictured them coming into the stable, not long after the shepherds, bringing their gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. But it probably did not happen that way. It took time to arrange for transportation and supplies. And they probably got to Bethlehem months, perhaps a year, later.

So this morning, I would like us to picture a somewhat different scene. I would like us to see those Magi, not at the end of their journey, but in the midst of it --making their slow and painful way across the desert, their eyes firmly fixed upon that "star."

"Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light."

That star was important to them. If they had not had it, they might never have found what they were looking for. And it is much the same with us. Ours might not be an actual light in the sky, but if we do not follow something, we might not find what we want either. The book of Proverbs tells us: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18) And John Killinger adds: "Without any clear goals in life . . . we simply drift along through the months and years and then wonder why life has seemed so disorganized or why it has yielded so few of the fruits we see others enjoying."

Florence Chadwick, the great long distance swimmer, discovered the importance of goals the hard way. On July 4th, 1952, she waded into the water off Catalina Island and began a 21 mile swim to the California mainland. The water was numbing cold, and the fog so thick she could hardly see the boats beside her.

Fatigue was no problem, but the bone-chilling cold was. And, 15 hours later, she asked to be taken from the water. Her mother and her trainer both told her they were close to land and

urged her not to stop. But, looking toward the coast, she saw nothing but dense fog.

So, after fifteen hours and fifty-five minutes, she was taken from the water --less than half a mile from land. Later she would say that she had not been beaten by fatigue, nor even by the cold, but by the fog which obscured her goal. If she could only have seen the land, she said, she would have kept on going. She needed something to aim for. And so do we.

But It is not enough to have just any goal. Saddam Hussein has goals. Adolph Hitler had goals. Napoleon had goals. Every two-bit punk who pushes drugs or knocks off liquor stores has goals. It is not enough to have goals in life; we need a worthy goal. When Steve Jobs of Apple Computer tried to recruit John Sculley, the 38-year-old President of Pepsi-Cola, he issued this challenge: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"

In the same way, God confronts us, urging us to find a worthy goal. One that stretches us, that makes us more loving, more helpful. Something that brings about good, not just for ourselves, but for others. St. Paul wrote, "I press on . . . for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:14) That is the kind of goal we all need, an upward call to make us better, finer people.

In The Shepherd of the Hills, Harold Bell Wright says, "In the hills of life there are two trails. One lies along the higher sun-lit fields where those who journey see afar, and the light lingers even when the sun is down. The other descends to lower ground where those as they go ever cast looks of dread over their shoulders and gloomy shadows gather long before the day is done." If there were only two trails in life, of course, our job would be much simpler. But most of us know many trails: some good, some better; some doubtful, some bad. But only one is best.

Shortly before his death, Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And, if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know."

But Thomas, outspoken as always, said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" And Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (John 14:1-6)

Now, that is an answer that disturbs a lot of us. We can not help wondering about the millions who have never heard of Christ, and the millions more who have heard, but have not been convinced. "Can there not be many ways to Heaven?" we ask. And I can only answer, "I don't know. I hope so!" But this I do know:

not all ways are equal. And I believe in the way of Christ. It might not be the only way. But many have found it the best way.

To quote Killinger again, "God has a goal for your life, and the only way to be truly happy is to seek it and find it. If you don't know where you're going in life, you may already have passed your stop. And if that stop had God's name on it, it is time you went back and found it again."

As we come to the table of communion this morning, let us seek there a Christ-shaped star to lead us through the deserts of life, past the side roads that lead to nowhere. You may recall that during their journey, the Magi somehow lost their star. And, as a result, they found themselves in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem.

But we have a light that never fails. One who has promised that, if we truly seek him, we shall surely find him. As we come to His table this morning, let us find and follow Him.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Eternal God, unlimited by bounds of space and time; we come here this morning to worship You in spirit and in truth. We bow before the mystery of Your Greatness, and we thank You for Your presence in our lives. In You alone we find true strength, true courage, and true hope. Deliver us, we pray, from slavery to false gods of pleasure, comfort, and wealth. Unloose the bonds with which they bind us, and help us to worship You and You alone.

In this new year, and always, enable us to seek the mind of Christ, to share in his compassion, to work to do his will. Release us from all that is unworthy, and inspire us to follow the high intentions of our souls. Day by day, enable us to look to You for help: in weakness to come to You for strength; in sorrow to come to You for comfort; in guilt to seek in You forgiveness; and in everything to find in You true Grace.

And Lord, as January 15th draws ever closer, we bring to You our prayers for peace and justice. Protect, we pray, the men and women whose lives are most at stake, assist those in power to find more peaceful ways to meet the problems that divide us. Where there is evil, overcome it with Your good. Where there is good, enlarge it and make of it an even greater good. Let there be peace among the peoples of the earth and righteousness here and around the world. So may Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. We ask it in Christ's name, and in His Spirit. AMEN.