

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
January 3, 2010
Rev. David R. Snyder
THE WISE FOLLOW A STAR
Micah 5:2-5a, Matthew 2:1-18

I grew up as a kid in Bethlehem, PA. If you lived there for any length of time you tended to slur the pronunciation from Bethlehem to Bethlem, or Betlam. Yeah, we're about an hour north of Philly, the Christmas city, founded by the Moravians, Betlam.

Early in the 15th century a similar slurring of pronunciation happened in England. A monastic order in London called "The Star of Bethlehem" began a ministry with folks who were mentally ill, opening a facility for persons who were often violently disturbed. It became known as the Star of Bethlehem Hospital, also known as London's lunatic asylum. As years passed Bethlehem was slurred to Bethlem, and then to Bedlam – that place of wild uproar. That's the story of the origin of the word bedlam.

It's also the story of what's happening with us as we move from Christmas into this New Year. From the serenity and beauty of Christmas Eve candlelight we are returning to our "normal" days and nights, often a cacophony of chaos, conflict, and confusion. We are moving from blessed Christmas peace to all those problems we cannot simply discard with the torn up Christmas wrapping paper. It's Bethlehem to bedlam!

We tend to sentimentalize Christmas. But the Bible shows us life as it really is, with Bethlehem and bedlam both. The Christmas story speaks of angelic choirs singing "Glory to God in the highest!" But it also speaks of wicked Herod ordering the slaughter of innocent children, a part of the story we never include in our pageants. That would be like a jarring discord in a lovely symphony, or a blotch of mud flung at a beautiful painting. Throughout Advent we rejoiced, anticipating our destination, Bethlehem, the focus of the hopes and fears of all the years, the arrival of God's holy Son.

But now the direction has changed. We are moving away from Bethlehem. And it will be challenging. The angel had announced "delight ahead" – a child, the Messiah will be born! Now the angel has announced "danger ahead" – take the child and flee to Egypt! You must turn from Bethlehem to bedlam!

It's the truth, isn't it? The wonder of Christmas did not cover up the personal issues with which we must cope. If you are a cancer patient, Christmas did not cure it. If you are unemployed you could not go the manger for a job. If you are recently divorced the holiday did not eliminate your hurt or anger. Bethlehem did not help college students write a paper or take an exam. A new year is upon us, with wonderful moments, satisfying achievements, joyful occasions coming, but there also will be decisions and dilemmas, difficulties and dangers out there waiting for us.

And in the wider world? In spite of Bethlehem there will be malnourished children, forgotten seniors, political prisoners, wounded warriors, innocent victims of terror. Have we forgotten that Jesus began life as a refugee? It's bedlam out there!

But that does not mean we give in to it. We do not surrender to cynicism or hopelessness. My friends, we have the gospel! Underline that! Never forget it! Immanuel means "God with us", and Immanuel, Christ has come. That's the good news. What happened at Bethlehem was for the sake of bedlam.

So how shall we make our journey through bedlam, through 2010, through life? I suggest that we look beyond the bedlam, that we gaze above it. I suggest the wise follow a star. As a church camp counselor during my college summers I loved to lie on my back in a field with little kids on a clear night beneath the star-studded sky and point to the constellations, in the vastness and majesty of God's creation. One year my son Tom gave me a telescope for Christmas. I never mastered it for star gazing, but I did spot through it the moon, and my neighbor's birch tree. The wise men were star gazers. They were probably from Persia, today's Iran. Scholars suggest that when the Israelites were driven into exile almost 700 years before Jesus, a small remnant of them made their way to Persia, taking with them their ancient stories, including one from the book of Numbers regarding a man named Balaam who had a vision about a star coming out of Jacob, a scepter rising out of Israel. The story may have been passed from generation to generation, ultimately picked up by the wise men. A stunning star, sent by Israel's God – why that would be worth wondering about, wouldn't it? And then it happened! Scanning the sky they spotted the star and set out, following it. And that is why, I believe, we call them wise. They followed the star.

Their impulse was the same as that which moved us to come here this morning – to worship – to offer praise, to pay homage, to rejoice in God's child, born to be king. Matthew never tells us how many wise men there were – 2, 3, 6, 20. But we are told that they had three gifts to present. There was frankincense, gift for a priest. Jesus, our Great High Priest, our intercessor, takes to God the deepest concerns of our souls, the issues facing us out of life's bedlam. Like the fragrance of sweet smelling incense rising to the heavens, our prayers rise with our confidence that our Lord hears and honors them.

There was myrrh, gift for one who was to die. Myrrh - for embalming - strange gift, don't you think, for a child at his birth? Here at the very beginning was a hint of what was to come. God's Messiah would be savior of the world, Lord of the cosmos, offering his life in sacrifice through the bedlam of crucifixion. Have you sung the Appalachian folk carol, "I wonder as I wander out under the sky, How Jesus our Savior did come for to die"? Indeed! In broken bread and poured out cup we shall celebrate that gift shortly.

And there was gold, gift for a king, but O so practical. When Herod, insane with jealousy at the threat of a newborn rival king, created bedlam, ordering the slaying of innocent baby boys throughout the Bethlehem region, Mary and Joseph fled in the night with Jesus to Egypt. But they were not penniless.

Tradition tells us they financed the journey with the wise men's gold, till at last they were home in Nazareth. We, too, present our gold as we worship him, our stewardship financing the entire life and ministry of Christ's church, in a sense financing our journey through life in Christ till we are at last home, beyond the bedlam, in the heart of God.

Our gold need not be financial. Sometimes in the bedlam we can be agents of God's care. In a recent review of the decade just ended I was reminded of Emory University's outdoor graduation exercises seven years ago when four people received honorary degrees. It was a pleasant day, and the students were restless. The doctorates were bestowed on a Noble laureate mathematician, an award winning playwright, and an ambassador to an African nation. The acceptance speeches droned on and on and the students began throwing Frisbees and mortarboards. But then the last person was honored and everyone grew silent. He was a helicopter pilot who had flown missions during the Vietnam War. Some of you are old enough to remember the My Lai massacre, a slaughter of innocents not unlike Herod's killing spree after the birth of Jesus. Bedlam. In the midst of the chaos, just as Lieutenant Calley and his men were about to kill a Vietnamese mother holding a baby, the pilot set his chopper down between them to prevent further tragedy. The pilot was court marshaled, and for many years he was branded unpatriotic. But eventually another perspective prevailed, and on this day he was receiving an honorary degree. To the hushed graduating seniors he explained why he did what he did. "I've always tried to live with the words I first learned from my parents", he said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I say it again. Sometimes in life's bedlam we can be agents of God's care. And it can be as simple as offering gold, the Golden Rule.

So wisely, the Magi followed the star, and so, I trust, have we. We've been to the manger, to worship. Now Christmas has passed and the star has faded. We are on our way from Bethlehem to bedlam, with no star to guide us. O, but that's not the case. The babe of Bethlehem, the child of Nazareth, the man of Galilee, is the crucified and risen One who has declared in the Bible's final chapter, "I am the bright morning star." May we be wise, and follow the star!