

Welcome on this first Sunday of a New Year. Some of you have probably been working on your New Year's resolutions. On the other hand, it's been three days. Some of you have probably already given up on your New Year's resolutions.

One poor guy I heard about tried praying about his resolutions. He got down beside his bed one night, closed his eyes and offered this earnest prayer: "Lord, in 2021, my prayer for the New Year is a fat bank account and a thin body. Please don't mix these up like you did last year!"

One conscientious man kept a careful record of his past resolutions regarding dieting. Here are his resolutions by the year:

2017: I will get my weight down below 180 pounds.

2018: I will follow my new diet religiously until I get below 200 pounds.

2019: I will develop a realistic attitude about my weight.

2020: I will work out 3 days a week.

2021: I will try to drive past a gym at least once a week.

The reason I have a copy of his resolutions is that finally he gave up altogether and threw his record of past resolutions in the trash where his wife retrieved it.

Someone has said, "A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other."

Someone else has said, "Every year I make a resolution to change myself--this year I'm making a resolution to be myself!" That's actually not a bad resolution.

One December 31 years ago Charles Schulz in his Peanuts cartoon strip had Snoopy the dog think to himself: "So this is the last day of the year. Another complete year gone by and what have I accomplished this year that I haven't accomplished every other year? Nothing!" He smiles and thinks to himself, "How consistent can you get?"

Remember this year because it is leap year you will have 366 days total and you have only used three so far.

"We'll leave the light on for you. . ." Whatever we think of the Motel 6 chain, they have a great motto. How often we are consoled by seeing that a light is left on, that we have a place to go, that we will feel at home. After a long drive, we arrive back at our home, the light shining on the porch. . After long flight over the ocean, we see lights that show we are now over land.

The long flight is over. People lost in the woods suddenly see headlights of cars on a roadway. Someone will help them.

Today's feast of Epiphany is essentially a feast of light. It revolves around the figure of a star in the sky, but it ends with the three wise men beholding the baby Jesus, who is light for the world. The wise men represent the searching of all humans for truth, love and wisdom, how God's light begins to shine on all human beings who open their hearts in honest searching.

The image of light has two aspects. One is that we see it. The other is that we reflect it. Many people today claim to be spiritual seekers, so they are like the wise men. But didn't the star shine on many people back then, but only the wise men noticed it? How many looked to the heavens and then just went on with the lives? How many never stopped to even look up?

Because God's wisdom can be seen only by those who take the time to look for it. Epiphany calls us to contemplation, to pull back from the hundreds of smaller and distracting lights so we can see the light of God that we need to see.

But light doesn't stop unless it's blocked. Last week we all marveled at the full moon on Christmas night, the first one in 28 years. The moon reflects the light of the sun. Those who

find Christ reflect his light in their daily lives. What does this mean? We try to incorporate Jesus' spiritual vision in our daily lives—that we so trust in the God of love and care that Jesus shows us that we show that love and care in our daily lives. This doesn't mean that we become monks, or escape from our daily routines. It means that our daily routines become infused with the values of Jesus—how we live in our families, how we do our jobs and relate to our co-workers, how we volunteer, how we give time and attention to those with less than we have. If we live in a time when people question religion and faith, maybe that's because of the way believers live their faith. We are so good at keeping our faith to ourselves! And we so often live our faith begrudgingly, seeing it as a burden or an obligation, rather than as the way to joyfully encounter the God of Jesus. Pope Francis has begun a year of mercy, calling on all of us to be missionary disciples—that is, followers of Jesus who show his quality of mercy to others and to the world.

The wise men brought gifts; they had them all along and intended to share them with God's newborn king when they found him. The last thing they wanted was to lug their gifts back home! Do we not find this true in our own lives—that when we give away the gifts of love and compassion, of generosity and kindness, that God has given us, then we see our lives take on meaning? Just as light wants to shine everywhere, so the gifts that God has given us do not exclusively belong to us. God has given them to us so we can give them away—and grow in joy as we do that.

We'll leave the light on for you! God has shone the light of Jesus upon all of us, so that people can see God has left the light on for everyone through us! So that people can see in us the way to the consoling light that is God's unending love.

II

Welcome to this celebration of the twelfth day of Christmas. I hope you ladies are enjoying your partridge in a pear tree, two turtle doves, three French hens, four calling birds, and particularly your five golden rings. This, of course, is Epiphany, the day we celebrate the arrival of the three magi offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the newborn king.

You may have heard about the three six-year-old boys who were playing the wise men in their church Christmas program. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said, "Gold."

The second presented his gift and said, "Myrrh."

The third one then gave them his treasure and said, "And Frank sent this."

"And Frank sent this." Makes sense to me. What do children know about frankincense and myrrh? Of course, as someone has noted, if it had been the Three Wise Women who came seeking the newborn king, instead of the Three Wise Men, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts.

One more interesting note: Back in 1984, a French perfume creator figured out a way to combine all three of the Magi's gifts into a new fragrance. For \$525, he would sell you a 24-karat gold-plated flask containing one-third ounce of "Amouage." The perfume was a blend of frankincense and myrrh. (1) I'm certain that there are some people with more money than sense who just had to have this expensive concoction.

I wonder what kind of men the three Magi were? In the folklore of our faith, they are given names-- Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In some portrayals of the men they have distinctive racial features-- Melchior, European; Balthasar, African; and Caspar, Asian. They represent people from all over the world coming to seek Jesus.

The three men have been characterized as kings. Obviously they were not lowly peasants. Herod and all of Jerusalem would not have been distressed if three peasants came seeking the newborn king. Matthew writes, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." I doubt that three nobodies would have had such impact.

They have also been called Wise Men, of course. Certainly they were students of the stars. Astrologers, perhaps. They had seen a star, a star unlike any other star, and they followed it until it came to rest over the house where the young child lay.

It is a stirring drama. Magi, kings, wise men. European, African, Asian. We really don't know much about these three men, but we do know three things. They were men of action. They saw their star and they followed it. These are the people in every generation who contribute to the race's advancement, people who see stars and follow them. Benjamin Disraeli once said, "The secret of success in life is for a person to be ready for opportunity when it comes." H. Jackson Brown, Jr. put it like this: "Opportunity

dances with those already on the dance floor." These three men saw their star, and without delay, they mounted their camels, and hit the road.

In 1982 a woman named Celeste Tate was shocked by how much good food supermarkets throw away. She persuaded a store manager to donate his expired items to help the less fortunate. She and David McKinley set up shop in a garage. Soon they had built the first Gleaners supermarket for the needy in Las Vegas. The name Gleaners comes from the Old Testament practice of leaving some grain in the fields after harvesting so that the poor may gather it.

Today the Las Vegas store serves about 20,000 people a month. There are now 194 stores based on the Gleaners model in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Holland and China. These not-for-profit shops receive food and other perishable goods from supermarkets and big businesses, repackage them and either give them away to the needy or sell them at dramatically reduced prices for those whose budgets are limited. The Department of Health and Human Services has called Gleaners the most outstanding food program in the United States. And it began because one woman was shocked at the waste in our supermarkets. (2)

Nothing happens in this world until someone sees a star and follows it. These three Magi were obviously men of action.

Of course, not every star is worthy of being followed. There are many people who are by nature impulsive. They may jump at any star--only to regret it later.

Some of you are old enough to recognize the name Carl Perkins. Perkins was a popular rockabilly singer from the 50s and the author of the classic song "Blue Suede Shoes" which was one of Elvis Presley's first big hits. As a guitarist, Perkins influenced many of the next generation of rock 'n' rollers, most prominently, George Harrison of the Beatles. Perkins never quite attained the fame of some of his more notorious colleagues. He once explained it like this: "I never envied Elvis his mansion and all that. All those boys--Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison--they all lost their wives, their families. People say, 'What happened to you, Carl? All of them went on to superstardom. Where'd you go?' I say, 'I went home.' And that's a good place to be." (3)

Carl Perkins made a choice not to follow the star of fame with the same intensity as some of his contemporaries. He felt that his star was at home. Sometimes that is a wise choice to make. Still, if we all chose to stay at home, the world would come to a grinding halt. The three Magi were men of action.

And they were men of determination. Theirs might have seemed to be a foolish adventure at times--following this star they had seen in the East. But they persevered until the star they followed came to rest over a house, and they knew their journey was complete. I love it when people follow through on a noble task and see it through until it is completed--whether the task is building a business, or a home, or a ministry, or whatever star they may be following.

Mary Kay Ash, who built Mary Kay cosmetics into a corporate giant, once said this: "If we ever decide to compare knees, you're going to find that I have more scars than anyone else in the room. That's because I've fallen down and gotten up so many times in my life." (4) Those are the people who are

successful in the world. People who refuse to give up. People who follow their star regardless of the obstacles.

Motivational speaker Earl Nightingale once told the story of an American team of mountain climbers who set out to conquer Mount Everest. Before the team left the U.S. a psychiatrist interviewed them. Each was asked individually, privately, "Will you get to the top of Everest?"

There was a wide assortment of answers. "Well, Doc, I'll do my best." "I'm sure going to try." Each knew how formidable was the challenge. But one of them, a slightly built team member, gave a totally different answer. When the psychiatrist asked him the question, he thought for a moment and then quietly answered, "Yes, I will." Not surprisingly, he was the first to make it to the peak of Mt. Everest.

Nightingale comments: "Yes, I will--three of the most potent words in our language. Whether spoken quietly, loudly, or silently, those three words have propelled more people to success and have been responsible for more human achievement than all other words in the English language combined." (5)

The Magi were men of action, men of determination. They were "Yes, I will" people. But more than anything else, the three Magi were men of faith. As they told King Herod, they were following their star that they might worship the one who had been born king of the Jews. The three wise men came with pure hearts. Their purpose was worship and praise. They came not to find gold, but to find God. Their purpose was to offer up gifts to their Savior and Redeemer.

One of the oldest Christian legends is the charming story concerning the Well of the Magi near Bethlehem.

The people of Bethlehem made a practice of going to this well during Christmas week. There they would bend over the opening of the well and cover themselves and the opening with blankets or cloaks, to shut out the light of day. Then, as they peered into the dark well, the star of Bethlehem, according to this pious practice, could be seen moving slowly across the water--but only by those who were pure of heart. (6)

The three Magi would certainly have seen the star, just as they did 2,000 years ago. Why? Because they were pure of heart. Because their priority was worship and praise. Because they were men of faith. I wonder if such a star should appear in the heavens this night whether you and I might see it. Are our hearts pure enough? Is our faith real enough? Theologian John Calvin once said, "If the sight of the star had so powerful an effect on the Magi, woe to our insensibility, who, now that Christ the King has been revealed to us, are so cold in our inquiries after Him."

Follow that star. People who make a difference in the world are not content to sit on the sidelines. They set their sights on a worthy star and they follow it with all their hearts. Of course, the most magnificent star that we can follow is the same today as it was in the time of the Magi. It is the star of Christ, himself. Bowing before him in adoration and praise and offering the gift of ourselves.

2. Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt, *Megatrends for Women* (New York: Villard Books, 1992), p. 276.
3. Source unknown.
4. Deborah Ford with Edie Hand, *The Grits (Girls Raised in the South) Guide to Life* (New York: Plume, 2003), p. 230.
5. Pastor Dan Mangler's Sunday Sermon, Shepherd of the Mountains Lutheran Church, ELCA Estes Park, Colorado http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday_sermons/january_16_2005_sermon.html
6. St. Gregory of Tours (594), *Libri Miraculorum* (Book of Miracles). Cited in Francis X. Weiser, *The Christmas Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952).

III

Think of the disappointment these men must have experienced who through the night had traveled many miles by camel to discover that the star had come to rest over a stable. They had followed a star and found a stable. Surely they were expecting a palace. Or perhaps a stately mansion. Think how they must have felt. Their vast disappointment as they look down from some nearby Judean hill and came to the realization that their destination was a stable.

Following stars and finding stables is a common occurrence in human experience. Who among us has not at some time in our life fixed our gaze on some high and lofty star only to find it leads to a stable.

Hundreds of examples could be given. A young man graduates from high school full of great dreams and expectations about the future only to wake up one day and discover himself enmeshed in the very drudgery that he had promised himself he would avoid.

A couple when teenagers resolved that they would not say the things that their parents say, but as parents they hear those words come out of their mouths.

A man comes to retirement age. He thinks of all the good things he's going to be able to do. After a few weeks, however, he begins to discover that retirement is not exactly what he thought it would be. The day starts growing longer. The hours become more oppressive. How many soldiers look forward to retirement, yet have nothing planned for retirement.

All of us at some time in our life follow a star only to discover a stable. The problem is how to turn that stable into a moment of salvation. What is it that enables wise men of every age to turn the stables of life into victory?

For one thing, they look for God in that stable. We could not have blamed those three men of old if they had just dropped their heads sadly and turned back toward home when they saw that their journey was to end in a stable. Perhaps, though, the thought came to them that the wonder and majesty of God and his purpose could be just as potent in the stable as in the palace.

As one reads the Scripture, if he is sensitive, he will note that the Scriptures are quite realistic about the stables that come to even God's people. The difference between the Biblical man and other men is that the Biblical man never gave up on God.

Take the Old Testament figure, Joseph, for example. You'll remember Joseph, the young man with the coat of many colors, who was stolen from his home, betrayed by his brothers, dropped into a pit, sold to slave traders, made a man-servant in a household in Egypt, lied about by his master's wife and put in prison. Can one suppose that during all that humiliation and disgrace he could see where God was taking him? Of course not.

But later when his brothers stood before him in humiliation and fear, he calmed their hearts with these words: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

Can you do that with your life? Can you look at your own disappointments and see God's power and purpose?

Just think of some of those prayers you said as a teen and fortunately were not granted.

A man was justifiably proud of his lawn until one year a heavy crop of dandelions appeared. He tried everything imaginable in an effort to get rid of them, but without success.

Finally in desperation, he wrote to an agricultural college, listing the remedies he had tried, and concluded with the appeal, "What shall I do now?"

Several weeks later, he received this reply: "We suggest that you learn to love them." Maybe we can't learn to love our disappointments, but at least we can ask whether some good may come from them. Look for God in that stable.

Secondly, wise men offer their best to God. The wise men knelt before the babe and offered him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The central problem with our lives is not that we have experienced more than our share of disappointments, but that we have not done the best that we could with what we have.

Renoir, the French artist, was afflicted with acute rheumatism, and suffered most of his life with that incurable malady. For many years he was forced to paint while sitting in a chair. A friend noticed one day that the artist was forcing himself to paint, through almost blinding pain. "You have painted enough," said the friend. "You are established as one of the top artists of France and Europe. Why must you go on, torturing yourself like this?" Renoir hardly looked up at him from his canvas. He said, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

"Give of your best to the Master," wrote the poet, "Give of the strength of your youth." That's not only a command from a sovereign God, but that's also a secret of successful living. What do you do when you follow a star and find a stable? First of all, you look for God and His purpose, then you give your best to God.

But the crowning experience comes when you make your way back from that stable, back into the pattern of everyday living.

And so third, because of what happens in the stable, they mark a new direction for their life. The wise men took a different direction home because they were warned that Herod was going to try to learn from them where the new King lay, but we might count it significant that this is always what happens when one encounters God and His purpose for life and attempts to give him best to God: he charts out a new direction for his life.

Disappointment can be the best thing that ever happened to you — you if helps you to grow, to mature. The difference between mediocre men and great men is that great men learn from their experiences —they learn and from their learning they gain new insights into their own needs and abilities. Thus, when they've picked themselves up, and dusted themselves off, they're better people for their experience.

A young man sitting in church one day made a startling discovery. He was a pre-med student, only nineteen years of age. The sermon that day was probably a dull one. There are such things I understand, dull sermons. Of course, you wouldn't know about such things.

Anyway, instead of listening to the sermon, this young man's attention was drawn to the altar lantern swaying back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. ["You are getting very sleepy . . ." If I could hypnotize all of you, I could stop now and go home.] This young man, however, did not get sleepy. Instead, he started timing the swings of the lantern, using his own pulse as a clock. And he made a discovery, a discovery that changed his life, and to a certain extent, changed our world. For, after this experience, this young man dropped the study of medicine and began studying mathematics and physics. His name, of course, was Galileo. According to Stephen Hawking, Galileo probably bears more of the responsibility for the birth of modern science than anybody who has ever lived. In fact, Albert Einstein called Galileo the father of modern science. From out of a boring sermon, science was born.

Galileo revolutionized how people kept time. At the time of Galileo's discovery the very best clocks in the world easily lost--or gained--fifteen minutes a day. A few decades later, after Galileo, all the best clocks were using pendulums and they were losing or gaining only ten seconds a day! No doubt hundreds of people had sat in that church watching that lantern sway--back and forth, back and forth--but Galileo saw much more. Whereas others simply saw an old oily lantern swaying back and

forth, Galileo thought, Aha! There's more here than meets the eye. Our life experiences, especially our failures are a way that God trains us for what we need to do.

Believe it or not I used to be an actor. (You can still see me as an extra in the movie the Exorcist or as a priest in the film The Word.) I must admit, I was a failure as an actor, but what it taught me was how to get up in front of people and speak loud enough for people to hear me. If it wasn't for my failure as an actor, I probably wouldn't not be a priest.

How about your own life this morning? Is that what you're needing most — a new direction? That's the glory of the gospel. That's why the story of the first Christmas is called good news, because it has a way of transforming the failure, coarse and commonplace into something significant and sacred.

So, I ask you: have you followed a star only to come in the end to a stable? If you have, then, look for God there. You may be surprised at what you find. Then, offer your best gift to God. He will use it in his Kingdom. And when you leave, go home by another way. Don't do what the Herods in this world ask you to do. These are the secrets of wise men of every age when they follow a star and find a stable.