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Epiphany 00 - January 5, 2025

“Just Follow the Signs”

Read: Matthew 2: 1–12 and/or Memorize: Matthew 2: 2

"For God so loved the world . . ." begins one of the best-known verses in the Bible. God loved the world! He didn't love only one small corner of the world. He didn't love any one little tiny race or tribe in the world. God loved the world!

He loved Jews and Gentiles alike. He loved a man and a woman named Joseph and Mary. He loved some shepherds. He loved the Wise Men, living way off in the east someplace, a place nobody knows exactly where. God loved the world, even nasty, murderous, old King Herod, who tried to kill His only-begotten Son.

"God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." And that finally extended His love to you and me.

God's love for the world expresses itself chiefly in His strong desire for the salvation of the people on this world. Because God loved the world, He sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Saint Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2:4, "God wants all people to be saved; to come to know the truth." To that end, God is still active in our lives, in the lives of all people, in a personal, intimate and individual way.

God has any number of ways of working in our lives. One way in which He is active is through wonderful signs that He gives us to draw us to Himself. Some signs are more majestic than others. Some signs are very hard to see, to even be aware of.

But in each life there are signs, signs that, when followed, lead to the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent. In Titus 2:11 Paul tells us, "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people. . . ." One of the ways He shows us that grace is through signs.

Look at the sign that God worked in the lives of those three Wise Men: the star! When the Lord Jesus was born, God, at the birth of His Son, placed a once-in-a-lifetime star in the sky. He didn't send those cute little cards with a picture of the wrinkled little baby on it. He put a brilliant star in the sky to announce the birth of His Son.

Nobody knows exactly what it was. There's been lots of speculation about it. Some think it might've been a constellation of some sort. Wouldn't it be great to be able to see it? But we didn't and can't. It was a special star that God created to announce this most wonderful news. It was a star that God brought into being for the specific purpose of bringing the Wise Men to know Him. It may have been a star that will never be seen again. Focus on seeing the star too much and you may miss all the other signs that there were.

The star was the sign God gave to the Wise Men. The Wise Men, in turn were the sign God gave to King Herod. Think about it: when these strangers dropped in from nowhere, asking Herod about the new king of the Jews, that must've gotten his attention as much as the star got their attention.

When the Wise Men came to Herod, asking about Jesus, that was God's action in Herod's life, calling him to come worship the Savior also. Remember, the star was guiding them, so why did they have to stop at the palace in Jerusalem? The Wise Men went out of their way to get to that palace. Their detour was God's way of getting the word about Jesus out to Herod. It was God's sign in his life.

Just as the Wise Men were a sign to Herod, Herod became a sign to scribes and priests. What happened when he asked these learned men about the coming of this Messiah? After all, he didn't know anything about this. They told him exactly what scripture said, including the name of the town. So, they actually had two signs. Herod was the first; the record of the scriptures was the second.

So, there you are, there are three separate signs from God, each given because of His love and His desire to save all people. To that end, He gave signs in their lives to lead them to the Savior. God is always faithful, but people are not. Each sign was greeted with a different response.

The Wise Men, who were wise, good for them, followed the sign of the star. They saw the sign and immediately followed it. They wanted to search for the new born King so that they could worship Him and bring Him gifts. Their search ended when they knelt, in exceeding great joy, before the baby Jesus and adored Him. The star, God's sign for them, had led them to their salvation.

Herod, shame on him, responded to God's sign in his life negatively. Instead of going with the Wise Men to worship Jesus, he laid out a plan to kill Him. Our text tells us that he was disturbed, and all of Jerusalem was disturbed with him. Herod didn't understand who Jesus was at all.

He saw the baby as a threat to his throne and, wicked man that he was, plotted against him. No matter how hard God tried to reach him, how clear a sign God gave him, he refused to follow, choosing instead to reject God and die in his sins.

Perhaps, saddest of all were the priests and the scribes. They were the learned men who understood the sign. They knew what it meant. But they did not go to worship Jesus. They understood, but did not believe. This is the one thing that could be worse than regarding God as a "bother," the way Herod did.

Seeing God's action in our life, understanding His work, but not doing anything about it, neither worshipping nor believing in Him nor rejecting Him, that's a colossal tragedy. Many people treat God just that way, simply ignoring Him.

We could try to defend Herod and the learned men by saying they didn't have the same chance the Wise Men had. The signs they got weren't as impressive. Maybe if they had seen the star, they would've followed? After all, bigger and better signs make for bigger and better reactions, don't they? Not necessarily. Besides which, who says they didn't see the star? The problem is not with the sign; the problem was with their response.

As we read the story, we have to deal with another problem. were the Wise Men really the only ones to see the star? Nobody else came running to find out what it was all about? The Gospels don't tell us about any mob scene at the manger. Only the Wise Men came.

If the star was that fantastic, why didn't other people see it and follow it? Is there a problem with the signs God gives or the people to whom they are given? The problem is people ignore the signs God gives.

It certainly seems like that is more of a probability. After all, Jesus called them out in His ministry, when He said they can read the signs about the weather, but they couldn't see the Savior standing before them, revealed by the signs. The problem is that people rarely stop to ask, "What is God trying to say to me?"

I'm sure many of us know someone who claims to be a Christian, but has not been in a church in years? They show no visible evidence of a life of faith. God has done many things for them, giving them many signs, filling their lives with wonderful things, but His call to them to live for Him appears to be too much of a bother. People, claiming to be Christians, forget that the kindness of God "is meant to lead you to repentance." These are people we should be praying for.

The prophets of the Old Testament, believed that all the politics of their day were signs from God and they tried to use those signs to call God's people to repentance. Might the politics of our nation, the affairs of our world, be a sign from God, calling us to repentance? So, we want to ask ourselves regularly, "What is God trying to tell me?" Because in His mercy, God is active in our lives, trying to tell us how much He loves us, how dearly He wants us to be saved.

Thank God in His grace, He has made us alert to signs in our lives. We see those signs all around us. In the waters of Baptism, the Word and the Sacraments, and individual signs that belong to each of us uniquely. By the Spirit, we see the signs and follow them to Jesus, the Savior. We believe and are saved.

"Just follow the signs," people say when giving directions. Those are our directions for the Epiphany season. That's all we really have to do, follow the signs. God gives us signs that lead to the Savior. As surely as the star led the Wise Men to Bethlehem. Signs lead us into life eternal with Jesus because of God's great grace to us.

Count me in: What signs are you seeing and how will you respond to them?