

## Star-Followers

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

Question of the day – how many stars have you followed in your lifetime? It is an ambiguous question, because there are different kinds of stars. Are we talking about human stars or celestial stars? Both, actually. In my life I have followed five human stars, two in the Navy and three in the ministry. The first was Commander George Church, and yes, that is his real name. He was the commanding officer of the destroyer on which I served as the weapons officer during Vietnam. George was the finest ship handler I ever knew. I soaked up his seamanship teachings. The second was Admiral James Hogg, and yes, that is his real name. I worked for Jim when he was a two-star admiral. He later wore four stars. Jim was the most ethical and moral senior officer I knew. From him I learned how to navigate the maze of the Pentagon and the military bureaucracy.

After retiring from the Navy I entered seminary. The first star I followed was Barry Kimbrough, now deceased. He was the senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Longmont, our home church. Barry taught me how to be a pastor on a personal and caring level. He was followed in Longmont by Keith Watson, who became the second star I followed. From Keith I learned about church organization, administration, and management. The last star I followed was Jean Miller Schmidt, a professor at my seminary, The Iliff School of Theology in Denver. Jean was my favorite professor and I took every course she taught. She imbued within me a deep love and appreciation for John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, his theology, and The United Methodist Church.

So, in that context of human stars, I would ask you again – how many stars have you followed in your lifetime? At least one, I am sure, and probably more. A star serves as a role model, mentor, and teacher. Following a star is not hero worship, like admiring a professional athlete. A star is someone from whom you learn and grow. If you have journeyed through the corporate world, you know about following stars. If you own your own business, someone taught you the ropes. If you are a craftsman, or an artisan someone mentored you through the creative process of learning how to skillfully use the tools of your trade, or art form. Eventually, of course, you may well find yourself becoming the star that someone else follows.

One must be careful. Sometimes we can follow the wrong star, or we can follow a star for the wrong reason. So many people are on destructive paths. To follow one of them is to become self-destructive ourselves. Or, to follow an unethical and immoral star simply because we see them as a ticket to the top is also, ultimately, self-destructive.

The Magi followed a different kind of star, a celestial one that led them to the Messiah, the baby Jesus. In Judea they heard different voices, that of Herod and an angel. They had to make choices as to which voice to heed. What the Magi experienced was the Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek verb meaning, “to appear openly.” The Epiphany is not the visit of the Magi to the Christ-child, but rather it is God’s willingness to reveal his glory in the child to the Magi. Epiphany marks the manifestation of the infant Jesus to the Gentile, or non-Jewish world. Today, Epiphany with a capital ‘E’ refers to this event. An epiphany with a lower case ‘e’ denotes an awareness of new ways of seeing and understanding things. To have an epiphany is to have an ‘ah-hah’ moment.

Victor Frankl was a renowned psychiatrist, who was captured by the Nazis in World War II and interred at the Dachau concentration camp. Frankl remembered the day when he must have felt like the Magi who sank into the blackness of astronomical gazing every dark night. One day, Frankl was on a work gang outside the fence of the camp. He wrote, “We were at work on a trench. The dawn was gray around us; gray was the sky above; gray was the snow in the pale light of dawn; gray were the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and gray their faces.”

Frankl relates how he was ready to die. It was if the gray bleakness had claws and each moment they dug deeper and deeper into his soul. Why go on? What could be the purpose of living if, indeed, he was even still alive at the moment? There was no heaven, no hell, no future, no past, only the clutching grayness of this miserable moment.

Suddenly, to his surprise, Frankl felt what he called a “last violent protest” surging within him. He sensed that even though his body had given up and his mind had accepted defeat, his inner spirit was taking flight, looking, searching. It was scanning the eternal horizons for the faintest glimmer that said his fleeting life had some divine purpose. It was, Frankl said, looking for God.

In a single instant, two things happened to Viktor Frankl that simply could not be mere coincidence. Within himself he heard a powerful cry piercing the gloom and tearing at the icy tentacles of death. The voice shouted “Yes!” against the “No” of defeat, and the gray “I don’t know” of the moment. And at that moment, Frankl said “a light was lit in a distant farmhouse.” Like a beacon it called attention to itself. It spoke of life and warmth and love. Frankl acclaimed that in that moment he began to believe again. In that moment he began to live again.

One can almost read the story of the Magi in Frankl’s words. They were also into a cycle of endless grayness, searching for the meaning of life. Then one day it happened. One night a new star was born. One night a bright light broke through their darkness. One night they had an epiphany of transcendence and they followed the star. They found the Christ-child and they beheld the Epiphany of God into the world.

We begin a new year with a new way of seeing, a new way of imaging and imagining what the world can be, of what our lives can be. Each of us is a searcher on our own journey of faith. Towards that end we are also star-followers of Christ, who is the Light of the world. To seek Jesus and follow him is to be a follower of the brightest and greatest star God ever created. We follow the Christ-star that was revealed to the Magi. To do so is to have life that reveals the glory of God. To do so is to always have life and hope for the future. Thanks be to God! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 1 January 2012  
[Epiphany of the Lord]