

Rise Up and Follow
Matthew 2:1-2; Luke 2:8-20
December 24, 2006

It was a night much like any other night in the Middle-East. In Judea, shepherds were spending the night with their flocks on the hillside, keeping them safe from wild animals that might otherwise attack. The city below was quiet as night had fallen. People were locked securely in their homes after a busy day in the fields, or the market, or the shop. For the most part villagers tried to ignore the treacheries of the evil King Herod, as they simply sought to scratch out a living in their little corner of the world. In far off Arabia, astrologers searched the sky, studying the movement of the heavenly bodies, and therein, attempting to find meaning, as they had done every night for years. Yes, it was a night much like any other night in the Middle-East.

Then it happened, the astrologer Malchior, noticed a strange occurrence. There was a bright object in the night sky, and it was in retrogression, moving the opposite direction from the rest of the stars. He called to his friends, "Caspar, Balthasar, come and look at this." They too, confirmed the appearance of the star; and as they studied it, its light seems to become ever more intense. They watched the star all night, and the next day they begin to study their star maps. They confirmed that this wondering star was indeed the star of kings, and it had moved in retrogression to meet the star of the jews. And all this happened in the constellation of the jews. "Could it be," asked Balthasar, "Could it be that the one whom the jews have so hoped for has finally come?" "The star, it is so intense, so. . . illuminating," commented Caspar.

Meanwhile, the shepherds were also gazing into the night sky; and suddenly *they* too sensed an illumination, as if the very glory of the Lord shone around them. What could it be? What was happening? Then, all of the sudden, as if straight from heaven, there was a voice, a wonderfully delicate, peaceful, heavenly voice saying, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. Unto you is born this day, in the City of David, a Savior who is the messiah, the Lord." The messiah, could it be? After all these years has the messiah come? Then suddenly the whole sky was aglow, and an entire chorus of heavenly voices was heard to sing, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, good will to all people."

Suddenly, this night was different. This night was different than any other night in all of history. The three astrologers, Balthasar, Caspar, and Malchior said, "This is a star like no other star. We must go; we must follow the light; we must search for the King of the Jews." And the shepherds too, said, "This is simply too great to ignore. Let us leave our flocks. Let us go to the City of David. Let us search for the messiah that we too may pay homage." Indeed, this night was different from any other night in all of history.

Do you sense it? Do you feel it? Do you feel the specialness of this night? This night a child is born. This night the divine became human so that we, in our humanity, may truly know the divine. As Eugene Peterson states in *The Message*, this night the *Logos*, the Word of God, the wisdom, the very essence of God almighty became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. Indeed this night is different from any other night in all of history. But still, it's not about history. As fascinated as I am with studies about first century Palestine, and research about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, their importance lies only in what they tell us about our lives today and our personal relationship with the risen Christ.

My friends, I tell you that tonight can truly be a night like no other night in your entire life, *not* because tonight we will have beautiful tableaux services and wonderful music, or candlelight in our fantastically spiritual sanctuary. No, my friends. . . tonight can be a night like no other because tonight, you will again have the opportunity to welcome the Christ child into your heart.

Again, I quote from *The Message*:

Whoever *did* want him
 who believed he was who he claimed
 and would do what he said,
He made to be their true selves,
 their child-of-God selves.
These are the God-begotten,
 not blood-begotten,
 not flesh-begotten,
 not sex-begotten.

So what about you? Do you long to be your “child-of-God self”? Will you be counted among the God-begotten? Will you, this very night, accept the Christ child anew as your Lord and your Saviour?

Let us again consider that night in the Middle-East two thousand years ago. Most of Judea lay sound asleep, completely oblivious to the glory that shone around them. Only two groups – the shepherds and the wise men – were aware of the divine birth. (As an aside, I find it interesting that shepherds and wise men represent opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum.) Still, it was the shepherds and the wise men that saw the signs and “heard” the call. It was the shepherds and the wise men that made the decision to set aside what they were doing, to rise up and follow, to follow the star, to follow the directions of the angels, to go to search for the Christ child.

So what about you? Will you set your daily routine aside? Will you answer the call? Will you rise up and follow? This night, God bends low to touch the world in a very real, physical way. Will you allow God to touch you? I have said before that I truly believe that we all have a calling by virtue of our Christian baptism. I tell you now, that I believe that call starts tonight. It starts with the welcoming of the babe in Bethlehem into your heart and into your life.

There are two biblical words that I am very fond of, and neither really has an adequate English translation. One is the Greek word *agape*, about which I will be preaching in January. The other is the Hebrew word *shalom*. Oh yes, I know that many of you are saying to yourselves, “*Shalom* means *peace*,” and of course you are right; but, it really means a sort of all-encompassing peace that is lost in its translation. It means peace in the world. It means a land free from violence and oppression, free from struggle and hardship; but it, at the same time, means peace in the heart. It *denotes* a spirit of calm within, a spirit of serenity. In spirituality studies, we speak of “being on your spiritual center.” Yoga masters speak of “walking in balance.” As a Christian, I tell you that finding your spiritual center and walking in balance both center on knowing and trusting the love of God in your heart and on sharing the love of God in your life. Isaiah refers to the messiah as *sar - shalom*, “the ruler of *shalom*” – more commonly translated, “the prince of peace.” Do you believe it? Will you truly embrace the *shalom* of

Christ in your heart and in your life this Christmas eve?

In your *heart* and in your *life* – both are critical to living *shalom*. In the midst of our hectic lives, we are called as Christians to know the true peace that comes from belief and trust in Christ as our Saviour and our Lord. We are called to find our spiritual center in the love of God. But that's only the beginning. You see, when the wise men saw the star, when the shepherds heard the heavenly voices, they did not say, "Oh, that's very nice." They did not say, "Oh, how peaceful." No, they rose up and followed. They followed the call of Christ. They went forth to worship him, to praise him. They went forth to witness and to share the good news of God among us, to witness and to share *shalom* on earth.

One of the prayers I like to pray at Christmas time, is a prayer of thanksgiving for the babe in Bethlehem. But then my prayer goes on to ask that I might so order my life after the example of that baby, that I might truly know his love, his joy, and his *peace* throughout the coming year. Will you make this your prayer? Will you truly seek to order your life after the example of Christ? "Order your life after the example of Christ. . ." – those words should sound familiar to you. They are part of the congregational prayer of response to Christian baptism. We promise to order our lives after the example of Christ every time there is a baptism in this church; but do we mean it. Will you make a commitment this Christmas season to order your life after the example of Christ? The star is still there. Do you see it? The heavenly voices are still there. Do you hear them? On this night, the Word, the *Logos*, the very essence of God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood, your neighborhood. Will you welcome him? Will this night be different for you? Shepherds left their flocks in the fields to search for the messiah. Wise men left their homes to follow the star. Will you too respond to the heavenly voices? Will you take the time to welcome the peace, the stillness, the calm, the *shalom* of Christ into your heart, into your home, and into you life this very evening? And then, will you rise up and follow, wherever the journey leads?

Let us pray. . .

Lord, you are the prince of peace. Help us to so order our lives after your example that we may truly know your love, your joy, and your peace. Help us to spread the good news of love, and joy and peace throughout the world. Give us the courage to rise up and follow you, wherever you may lead. This we pray in your holy name. Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger
Associate Pastor