

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“G.P.S.:
God Positioning System”
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12**

**Epiphany Sunday
January 6, 2019**

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.

Matthew 2:1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.””

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

“G.P.S.: God Positioning System”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over the past few years, you’ve likely seen—or maybe even participated in—the “elf on a shelf” craze. If you don’t know what this is, parents will often place a stuffed elf on the mantle or bookcase or anywhere around the house. This elf is supposed to keep an eye on little children and report back to Santa. While it’s a cute tradition, some folks wanted to steer away from the Santa aspect and focus more on the daily placement of a toy. And so the Facebook page “Wandering Wisemen” was born. A family uses the elf on a shelf motif, but in this case they

follow Gaspar, Melchior, Balthazar and their faithful camel Hezekiah on their quest to find the infant king.

Speaking of Facebook, the cover art for today's bulletin is a rare gem from the World Wide Web. This is one of Betsy's favorite memes. As you can see, after the three wise men left, the three wiser women brought gifts of diapers, formula, and casseroles. The cartoon jokingly leads us to believe that the Magi were the first and the last men ever invited to a baby shower, because their presents were neither practical nor child-friendly. Their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were, in fact, symbolic gifts. Just as the wise men themselves are symbolic.

These wise men, or Magi, or astrologers—depending on your translation—are universally accepted to have come from somewhere out East. Persia, Indian, maybe even China. Their exact origins will likely never be known to us in this lifetime. What is known, and what is of utmost importance, is the fact that the wise men are Gentiles. They are not Jewish scholars nor are they Hebrew astrologers. They are Gentiles. Folks outside of what Israel assumed to be the household of God. And yet, they came to worship the King of the Jews. They came bringing with them gifts, three of which are named in Scripture. Gold, a gift truly fit for a king, symbolizes the kingship of Christ and his headship over the church. Frankincense, a gift suitable for worship, symbolizes the priesthood of Christ and his intercessions on our behalf. Myrrh, an oil used in purification rituals, symbolizes Christ's prophetic role in preaching the coming Kingdom of the Father. These outsiders recognized the tri-fold office of the Messiah and came to worship accordingly. So while their gifts were not practical or suitable for a modern baby shower, they were truly appropriate for Jesus the Son of God.

Today is January 6, which is when Christians around the world celebrate Epiphany as the day the wise men arrived in Bethlehem to greet Jesus. Everything about Epiphany has to do with being guided toward the truth and gift of God's word. The word epiphany comes from the Greek word *epiphanos*, which literally means a shining forth. In modern parlance we use that word for the eureka moment, when someone has an epiphany. In the Bible, however, epiphanies are directly connected to God's presence in human history. Actually, almost all the uses of the Greek word have to do with Christ's second coming, rather than his birth. The holy day of Epiphany is a celebration of God's entering into human history to guide and change the world. And ultimately to enter in with a final judgment and the new Jerusalem. The power of God is clear. He has manipulated nature to bring total strangers to come and worship Christ the King.

The revelation of the star is a powerful and memorable image, yet it's really a minor part of the whole story. Nevertheless, without the star's appearance, the journey would never have begun. This cosmic body appears in the sky, and the Magi think to look up and follow this unknown promise towards something greater. At the beginning of the movie *Stardust*, the narrator asks, "Are we human because we gaze at the stars, or do we gaze at the stars because we are human?" The invention of the electric light has spoiled our interest in stargazing. We rarely look with wonder up at the heavens because our gaze is fixated on the iPad or the evening news. I wonder what made the magi look up at the sky, the night they saw the star. Perhaps they were contemplating the vast nature of the universe? Or the immeasurable beauty of the heavens? Or perhaps they were wondering what to do next in their lives? The funny thing is, God gave them

an answer. The star becomes knowledge and a direction for the Magi. It represents an understanding beyond them and therefore they are moved to seek out that wisdom. God uses the star to guide them to Christ and to give light to their way. The star becomes a sign of hope for the future and the end of a journey. When the star stops, the Magi trust that something will be there at the end.

While we do not have the bright celestial body of the wise men, God still gives us stars that lead us to him. They help us to figure out what to do in our lives and what roads to take when we come to a crossroads. One of the most profound and obvious of these stars is Scripture. The Bible is not just any old book. It's not even "The" book. It's God's very word. The passages written down for us are God's self-revelation to the human race. These are our guiding stars straight from the Father himself. Scripture teaches us about prayer, worship, meditation, and daily living. Scripture records for us the stories and events that changed history and reveal God's love for his people. The journey of the wise men was long and hard, and while they did not have Scripture to guide them, they certainly had a direct witness through the star above Bethlehem. Following our star is an equally arduous journey.

Popular literature and self-help books will tell you that piety is a matter of attitude or an outdated mode of living. But it's not. Piety is a discipline. It takes hard work and study and a lifetime to perfect. Our piety is what connects us to God and what allows us to hear his voice directing us and to see his light illuminating our paths. The heart of our piety is Scripture, but we use so much more. We read devotionals and participate in studies, we pray and we worship, we find what connects us most to God in our lives. These things ground us and give us roots. As we are rooted in faith, we make room for epiphanies. We make way for God's light to shine forth and show us the way to Christ. This may come by noticing things we never saw before, or becoming more aware of things in life. Our foundation of faith doesn't distance us from the real world, but heightens our senses as we live. We learn to pay attention to what's going on around us. Sometimes the world may align with us and with God, and that's great! But oftentimes the world tries to lead us astray, and so a firm foundation keeps us from wayward leanings. Keeping ourselves on God's path isn't easy work by any means, but it is important work. We have to follow God. We have to trust in the promise of Christ at the end, because we know that at journey's end we will gather to worship with all the saints.

As we travel along our journeys, it's important for us to ask for directions, however hard that may be. No one person knows it all, and if they claim to, they're lying. We may find good help, people and things that direct us truly. Sometimes we may ask the wrong people, the Herod's of our lives, who deceive us with nice words and try to take us off God's path. But even there, God's secret plan is at work and his promise to keep us from hell's snare never wanes. We need all the help that we can get, as we walk God's path. The wise men paid attention. They followed the star faithfully, letting it give their lives direction, and they found the promise fulfilled waiting for them at the end.

To help us out in 2019, instead of making churchwide resolutions, I'd like to invite you to participate in a new year's G.P.S., God Positioning System. During Communion, you'll receive a third tray, which contains a star word. I invite you to let that word be your G.P.S. for the year.

Use it to help give you direction, something to follow, as you walk through this journey of faith. Or use this word as a spiritual discipline, something to heighten or deepen in your personal piety. No picking and choosing for a word. Let the Holy Spirit work through providence and take the first one you grab. Over the next year, I encourage you to reflect on your word. Place it somewhere you'll see it regularly—your mirror, your computer, your planner, your phone. Ponder what significance the word may have in your life, and how God is speaking to you through it. If the word doesn't seem like much now, give it time. You may discover throughout the year that it is an appropriate gift to you, and that it brings you growth.

What you do with these words is up to you. My prayer, though, is that these stars will be a guide and a source of direction on your journeys with God over the next year. May his presence be forever with you, directing your path for his glory, first and foremost, and ultimately leading you to a deeper relationship with Christ our Savior. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, I know that you have delivered us through this past year with its many ups and downs. And I know that you will be with us every moment of 2019. We start out this year with your Epiphany, your self-revelation to the Gentile wise men. We start this year with a hopefulness and trust in you. May our love for your Word be more ardent this year and may these star words guide us to another level of personal piety, that we may be ever closer to you. In the name of Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.