

Did you know that the biggest and worst traffic in South Korea is on New Year's Day? Obviously, the commute to work and back in rush hour traffic takes hours, even when most people use the very well-designed public transportation system which is also very crowded. The reason for this traffic on New Year's day is because most people travel with one thing in mind, the "New Year's Bow, or Greeting". Almost everyone visits both sets of parents and grandparents if they are alive, and some mentors or whoever they honor if there are no parents, to give them a proper greeting to begin the year "on the right footing". To honor parents and/or in laws, married couples with or without children travel to each house to greet them properly while many visit parents and grandparents who have passed on out of respect and remembrance. If not out of honor, it is out of obedience and duty as it is moral and right; it is proper, honorable, and respected to give this greeting especially as Koreans still live in a shame/honor society. No matter what religion each family practices, the New Year's Bow wishes, hopes, and prays a blessing upon those receiving this greeting while it satisfies the duty everyone has to respect the elders, to honor others, and tradition passed down for generations after generations. Many wear traditional clothing such as I have on today and does what I will show you. Today, I honor God and bless his name for the new year! (bow to the altar).

With this bow to begin the new year, we join together on Epiphany Sunday to remember the bow of the Magi to the baby Jesus in the story we heard read today from the Gospel of Matthew and to celebrate the revelation of the light God sent to all people, as told by Prophet Isaiah. "Arise, Shine: For your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and peoples but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn!" The Isaiah text highlights for us that the light that God sends is not just to one nation but to all of creation.

And to this end, the story of the Magi seems to tell a story of how God seems to do whatever it takes to reach to and embrace all people. Bishop Craig Satterlee in the ELCA of Lansing Michigan wrote, "God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God's own people through visitors from the East. From a manger where a child lies wrapped in

bands of cloth, God's reach, God's embrace in Christ Jesus gets bigger and bigger and bigger." So as we claim to have received this light on Christmas day in the baby Jesus, can we see this light in the world, and as we aim to live as the light in this world, how do we respond to this light?

King Herod was made aware of this light that came into the world by visitors specifically to him. He heard the testimony of the "wise-men" from the East, learned of the prophecy passed down through generations of the Jews by the Chief priests and the scribes, and confirmed his findings again with his visitors but his response was of fear, secrecy, violence, and denial. The fear of losing his power spread to "all Jerusalem" infesting his people. He worked in secrecy and deceit to hide his confirmation of the facts while dealing with his sense of fear and insecurity by unleashing violence upon children and his people, initiating the infanticide. All this as denial of the true light that has come to the world.

Surely we don't respond to the light as King Herod did right? I am first to confess that in dark times of my life I allow fear to take over and it infects others around me in how I behave. Sometimes blinded to the truth and the light in situation, as small it could be, I deny its existence and try to shed my own light. I lash out at others with my anger and frustration, reflecting my anxiety on others and hiding my true feelings from others. Fear, Secrecy, Violence, and Denial.... I pray this is not my year 2020, or yours.

However, an unlikely bunch of people teach us some important lessons as we begin the new year. We call them the Magi or wisemen but there are researchers who say that these "wise men" or "three kings" as some call them were not what many think they were. In the eyes of the main audience of Matthew, the Jews, the Magi were the most unlikely bunch of people they could ever tell stories about as they were the "outsiders", outcasts, and Gentiles, the non Jews who believed and worshiped idols, other gods, namely science, astrology and the skies. Like the modern day horoscopes or psychics, the Magi or Zoroastrians studied the sky and the movement of the stars and were advisors to the royalty, which may have given them the mistaken name "three kings". The Zoroastrian is known as a religion precursor to Islam today as it originated from the Persians or in our modern day Iran. (We remember to pray for the unrest there today). They were also known to be traveling from place to place in large crowds

including women Magi. And these were the people God chose to send the revelation of the light in the darkness in the time of King Herod.

And these “wise men” responded to the light in ways we could learn from to mimic in our lives. When they received a revelation from the star, they searched. They experienced Joy, Worshiped, and Gave. They searched, overcome with curiosity which spurred them on to investigate, making a long journey from Persia to Jerusalem, they followed the light, sought answers, and did not give up even if it meant asking for direction and risking presenting themselves to a foreign king. They were bold in asking a king about another king’s existence! Though they were true to their own religion of studying the stars and allowing dreams to speak to them as often they did, they also allowed prophecies of the Jews to form their understanding of what they saw. They let Joy overtake them in the prophesy fulfilled in another tradition and the confirmation of their search as they met the baby Jesus and Mary even in their lack of full understanding of what this all meant. They worshiped the little light they encountered and humbled themselves to a baby boy. To worship is to acknowledge who is in their presence and to kneel or pay homage is to acknowledge who they are in respect to the one they stand before. To worship is to lift up the one who is being worshiped and to lower the self in humility. Then if prostrating themselves was not enough, they opened their treasure chest and forfeited their most prized possession, offering it to Jesus. As travelers on a long journey, to give out of their treasure chest was to give of themselves and their own securities. So the unexpected, unlikely bunch, the Magi responded to the light God revealed by searching, experiencing joy, Worshipping, and Giving.

This is indeed the opposite response than King Herod’s and it challenges each of us to think deeply about our own responses to God’s revelation of light in the moments of darkness in our lives. It also helps us start the new year by inspiring us to recommit ourselves to live in the light and as a light in the world.

First, could we open ourselves to God’s revelation of light from anywhere, even in the most unlikely way or from unexpected places and people? How about committing ourselves to growing in our faith and our knowledge of God through participating in Bible study and quiet times, reading of scripture and praying regularly? Maybe get to know someone who believes

differently than we do, to learn from them, and to let their understanding and beliefs influence our own?

Could we keep our eyes open even in the darkest of times to search for the light, to hope in the smallest of light, and follow the light even when it's hard? The truth is, God always fulfills his promises to us. How about also helping those around us by being a light of hope for them and be willing to share with others the journey of life, especially in tough times, to be a light together.

Could we commit to finding the joy that nothing can take away? Can we rely less and seek less the materials and other things to satisfy temporary pleasures of life, but to seek what is just for all human kind and creation, to find what pleases the soul and God's will for you...

And knowing that we are in the presence of a great and almighty God who loves us, could we humble ourselves before God and others while we offer our best to others trusting that God would provide for our needs? Could we spend time in worshipping God, not just in a worship service but to make every day a worship to God, aiming to please our father in heaven, our creator?

Bishop Craig Satterlee continues "Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace." Let us live into that this year at UMCG, to live as Jesus lived, to see who Jesus sees, embrace those Jesus embraces, to humble ourselves as Jesus humbled himself to us. To be a light and to live in the light. Amen.