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FOLLOW THE STAR
Matthew 2:1-12
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As we begin this new year, some of you know how excited I am about the things that are ahead for us as a congregation. You can read all about it in our newsletter and in a piece called "Catch the Vision." You can find these in the hallway.

Look at what is going to happen this year: Completing our new building. Holding our 10th Anniversary celebration. Beginning a thriving Signature Ministry. Considering a new name for our church. Increasing the number of Growth Groups. Not to mention Upward Basketball and Cheerleading with almost 300 children registered and one of the finest Parents' Day Out ministries in the area. I think all those things are worthwhile and exciting. In fact, I believe they will help us move toward doubling our worship attendance, one of my personal goals for the church.

However, as exciting as all this is, we could achieve all the goals above and still miss the mark if each of us is not more Christ-centered and Christ-directed by the end of this year.

This is where the story of the wise men who came to baby Jesus fits in for me. The story of the magi reminds us that it is not just about being a bigger and better church. It is about following the star to Jesus, giving him our hearts, and going home by another way. That pretty much sums up what we are really about.

So I want to reset the stage this morning. For those of you who have been around the past year, this is nothing new. For those of you who are new, I hope you catch a glimpse of what God wants to do in all our lives through our church.

About a year and a half ago, we began asking the question: *What is it about our experience with Jesus Christ that others cannot live without?* We were trying to find our core message and our vision. What emerged from lots of conversations and congregational gatherings and prayer were three words: "Peace-Purpose-Promise". These words seemed to resonate with many in our church. We asked ourselves: Aren't these the things we long for? Aren't these the things we receive through Jesus Christ living in our hearts? Aren't these the things we believe God wants the world to experience?

We realized that our way of determining the success and strength of our congregation is by the growth of peace, purpose, and promise in our hearts and souls.

Peace that rules our hearts because of our reconciliation with God and with others;

Purpose that gives our lives meaning far beyond our selfish desires;

Promise that keeps us focused with hope on God's future.

I have started thinking of these as a "Trinity of Grace". God would love to see His children living within the environment of this trinity.

So how does this come to pass? How can we help one another experience this trinity of grace?

We have answered that this way: *By making and growing disciples of Jesus who give their lives to make a difference in the world.* This Trinity of Grace becomes a reality in our lives and in the world through a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

I think the magi are a good model for us. They follow the star to Jesus, worship him with their gifts, and go home by another way. That's the way God works. Once we lay our lives at the feet of Jesus, God begins guiding us in a new path, giving us a new direction. Sometimes we call it transformation. Whatever we call it, Jesus sets our feet on a new path to our true home. This path is the path we call discipleship.

Some of you might remember my brilliant "5 D's of Discipleship". I unveiled it last year with a sermon series in January. I am sure you all remember every word of it. Here it is again for those who may have slept since then.

What I wanted to show is that discipleship is an intentional process that begins with the Decision to follow Jesus and always leads to Deployment in missions and service. Between Decision and Deployment, or along with them, are the necessities of Discovery, Discernment, and Development:

Discovering God's Word through worship and study,
Discerning our Spiritual Gifts and God's Purpose for our life, and
Developing our Spiritual Gifts for use in missions and service.

I am convinced that we will not grow in discipleship or in our relationship with Jesus unless we are engaged in all five D's over and over throughout our lives. On the other hand, the more we are engaged in the 5 D's, the closer we come to experiencing the Peace, Purpose, and Promise of God.

Teresa and I visited a church in Lynchburg, Virginia, last Sunday. It is the church where my sister and brother-in-law are active members. What an inspiration they are to that church as every Sunday they wheel in their two severely handicapped children, now 38 and 40 years old, for worship and Sunday School! They are also the leaders of a small group in their church,

the only one. We talked a lot about small groups and how to make small group ministry a part of the life of their church. I kind of bragged about our Growth Groups as a good model. They were impressed that we had 9 groups in the Fall with 120 adults participating. One thing I told them was that the pastor had to be committed to small groups. I said it had to begin with their lead pastor. So you can imagine their excitement on Sunday when the lead pastor named what he called three resolutions for the New Year. One of them was to lead the church in a disciple-making ministry. Then he made a statement that caught everyone's attention. He said, "We don't need more members." (Silence as the 400 in attendance gasped.) "We need more disciples." He said it in a nice way.

He is exactly right. That's what every church needs. That's what the world needs. More disciples, people who live their lives according to the light and goodness of Jesus Christ.

My prayer for this year 2009 is that we not lose our focus on what really matters. My prayer is that each one of us will take the path that leads to growth in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Not just knowing more about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, but knowing them in a personal way. Being able to come into the presence of God just as we are - bent, broken, spent, lost, immoral, desperate, self-righteous, and all the rest - laying all that we are before him, and then letting God speak to our hearts and letting Jesus take away our sin to raise us to new life and letting the Spirit ignite the flame of faith, hope, and love.

Let us ask ourselves today, Where will we be in 12 months in our discipleship? Almost everyone receives letters at Christmas from friends who tell us what has happened to them throughout the year. What will we put in our spiritual Christmas letter at the end of this year? What will be the headlines of our lives? Will we be more dependent or less dependent on Jesus? More like him or less like him? Praying more? Studying the Bible more? Serving more? Living with a deeper purpose? Laughing more? Sharing more?

When all is said and done, these are the things that will matter no matter what else we accomplish as a congregation.

Like the Wise Men, let us all follow the star, give Jesus our hearts, and go home by another road.