

From time to time you'll see in the newspaper the results of the latest poll of religious beliefs and practices. A recent poll by the *Star Tribune* asked residents of Minnesota "Do you believe in God, or in a god?" According to the responses, 78% of Minnesotans definitely believe in God and another 13% lean toward believing there is a god.

I must admit that polls like this drive me a little nuts because they purport to give us some insight into people's religious beliefs, but in reality, they tell us very little. The reason these polls have little value in my estimation is because the polltakers don't define what they mean by the terms "God" and "believe". That was evident in this particular poll because the reporter kept bouncing back and forth between spelling "God" with a capital "G" and a lower-case "g" without giving any note of explanation of how she was using the terms. Evidently, when people were asked the question, "Do you believe in God, or in a god?" the people were free to respond to whatever image of a god they had at the moment. A devout Christian and someone deeply into New Age spirituality would both respond, "Yes, I believe in God" – but there is no agreement whatsoever in who or what they believe God to be. And by not defining the word "believe," there's no way to discern whether people are using "believe" to simply acknowledge the existence of a supernatural being or indicate they have a relationship of trust with a personal God that affects how they live their lives.

While the poll doesn't really tell us what it purports to tell us, it does show once again that the vast majority of people in Minnesota, like all humans of every time and place, do wonder about and ponder the existence of God. Over the centuries, many philosophers and theologians have tried to prove the existence of God by formulating logical proofs. Our generation seems more intent on trying to prove or disprove God's existence with scientific evidence. In the past decade, the Hubble telescope and other high-tech instruments have enabled scientists to "see" out to the outer reaches of the universe, actually look back in time, where observed fluctuations are thought to be echoes of the "Big Bang," the moment of creation. The detection of the long-postulated Higgs boson by the Hadron super-collider two years ago was hailed by the media as discovery of "The God Particle."

Of course, for someone who is a religious person, such scientific evidence is not necessary for faith. And for a firmly entrenched atheist, no scientific evidence would be persuasive. But even for those of us who might respond in a poll that we strongly believe in God, we wouldn't mind seeing some hard scientific evidence to back it up.

The reason I bring this topic up today is that our reading about the magi is a story about scientists. Certainly the magi were not astrophysicists or biologists, but the way Matthew describes them would indicate that they were some of the most educated people of their time. It's true that to the Jewish community of Jesus' day these star-watchers from the east would have been considered Gentile idolaters who dabbled in religious hocus-pocus. They don't worship the right God. They are heretics. But on the basis of their observations, their "science," they go on a spiritual quest. Not only were they educated, they were likely somewhat wealthy as well, being able to finance their long journey and purchase their gifts.

The education and wealth of the magi are a sharp contrast to the others in the Christmas story – Joseph and Mary, a simple carpenter and his young wife; and the rough, uneducated shepherds that we find in Luke's telling of the story. Throughout his ministry, Jesus seemed to have a preference for the common person and those marginalized in society – the tax collectors and prostitutes, the handicapped and poor. When Jesus preaches in his hometown of Nazareth, he uses the words of the prophet Isaiah to describe his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus does seem to have a special place in his heart for the poor and marginalized.

But in the story of the magi we see that there is also a place for the educated and the wealthy in the story of Jesus. The magi's learning does not jaundice them, causing them to smugly think they will not

believe something unless it can be proved to them. Their wealth does not burden them, as they are not above entering the house of a poor couple.

For me, the story of the magi is a reminder that we need not check our minds at the door when we enter a church to worship. God has given us our intellect, our curiosity, and our desire to learn, and we glorify God when we use these gifts. But though the magi searched diligently, they did not find the new king by virtue of their own knowledge and efforts. They found him only as God showed them the way. The God of Jesus is not a discovered God, but a revealed God.

This continues to be true today. We don't discover God by our own efforts. Science can help us understand the beauty and complexity of the universe, and can even point toward the existence of a God who is behind it all. It is unlikely that science will ever be able to prove God's existence, but even if it were able to, science would not be able to tell us what this God might feel about us, or how we should live, or how we should treat each other.

What science tells us about God's creation is important, but not ultimately important. What is ultimately important is what God has revealed about himself to us. We can use our best scientific instruments and theories, but we won't find a God of love on our own. Like the magi, we will discover this God only when we are guided by God himself.

Our next hymn tells us that God is still providing a star to guide us, just as God did for the magi. I want to read the last two stanzas to you before we sing them. The words are written by Nikolai Grundtvig, a Lutheran bishop in Denmark in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Guided by the star, they found him whose praise the ages sound.  
We too have a star to guide us, which forever will provide us with the light to find our Lord.*

(Then he tells us what our star is...)

*And this star, as bright as day, that will never lead astray with its message so appealing,  
is the word of God, revealing Christ, the way, the truth, the life.*

The star (the Bible) still shines, and it still leads to the place where God makes himself known to us – in the one who was born in the manger at Bethlehem.

I'd like to conclude with a word of advice from an unlikely source – King Herod. Herod is the villain in this story, but at one point he says something very important to the magi. He says, "Go and search diligently for the child." Herod was saying this for the wrong reason, but he unknowingly was giving good advice to people of all times and places. "Go and search diligently for the child."

Over the next 18 weeks, we will be reading passages from the gospel of Matthew at worship, but those passages will add up to less than half the book. I suggest that you make a New Year's resolution to read the entire gospel during the month of January, just as you would read any other book, from beginning to end. You might put a piece of paper with your Bible and jot down things that surprise you or perplex you. (I guarantee that there will be things that surprise or perplex you.) As you read, remember that a gospel is not a biography in the sense we use the term. It is not intended to be an objective historical account. Its purpose, as it says in its opening sentence, is to convince the reader that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.

"Go and search diligently for the child."

"Follow the star to Bethlehem."

The God who reveals himself in Jesus will be there to meet you.