**To Follow a Star**

*A Sermon by The Rev. Patricia Rhoads Davis*

*Christ Church Episcopal*

Matthew 2:1-12

1 Christmas, Year B

Dec. 31, 2018

One of my favorite memories of Christmas as a child is of attending the “Tri-church Festival” here in Savannah. My church, St. Paul’s Lutheran, sat right next door to the Greek Orthodox Church, which was across the street from the Baptist Church. So in December, the 3 choirs and members of the 3 churches joined together to put on an outdoor Christmas pageant, complete with donkeys and a real camel and 3 kings dressed in gorgeous clothes, splendid enough to delight anyone in love with the drama of it all. Our congregations sat on the steps of the Baptist Church while the pageant took place across the cordoned-off street in front of the Greek Church, with the massed choirs behind. And the 3 kings processed in slowly, singing their respective verses of the famous hymn about them. And I was always captivated by the idea that they had come so far, travelled so long, in search of someone they did not know, to answer a mystery they only dimly perceived. It is the essence of every person’s journey I think, this search for meaning in the great mysteries of life.

And so we retell it every year, hoping for light shining in the darkness of this darkest time of the year, but there are shadows everywhere. The reading begins, “In the time of King Herod,” which should be enough to convey the darkness that lay over the land, for Herod was a Roman despot, hanging onto power by brutal suppression. Herod heard of the search for the child born to be king of the Jews and “he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,” for a new king threatened not only his power but the uneasy political and social stability that existed in Judea. And historically, when Herod was frightened, people died. So for Herod, there was no mystery but only a personal threat to be met and overcome. And Herod did what threatened people always do, he met in secret with those 3 magi, hoping to manipulate them to his advantage, so that he might keep what he had: his power, his position, his prestige, his ego.

And yet the wise men were governed by a greater power, the power of mystery to cut a path through the landscape of life. These are men who don’t look for which way the wind is blowing to know where to go, but people led by a star, something visible only in the darkness. And it’s right here that we encounter our own roadblock, for we are uncomfortable with mystery and would rather not spend time in the darkness. It’s unsettling, this unsure groping after something vague. We want to know the way before we set out, want to have plans and maps, a GPS for life if you will, so there are no wrong turns, no getting lost, no disturbing surprises. That’s the difference between us and these ancient wise men, who were not called *wise* for nothing. Because we are generally unwilling to attempt the journey unless we know where it will lead. We would not load our camels, would not strap on our sandals, would not risk the desert. We would not travel except in daylight when we can see the path. We are a practical people after all, with days much too busy and too short for “wondering.” But God beckons us into shadowy mystery, with only some old stories and the rumor of a baby to guide us.

There was a book printed many years ago with the title, “I’m OK; You’re OK” and that is the way we want it to be. We are unwilling to be “not OK.” It is the exact opposite of the wise men, who stepped out into the unknown. Unsettled, unsure of the way, unsure of themselves, they set off anyway, willing to be led by something they didn’t really understand--- willing to be led by the conviction that there is a God who does know the way, through the valley of the shadow and beyond. And like them, we must allow for mystery if we are to be followers of Christ, for He can never be perfectly sketched, but must always remain the One whom we seek, the mystery that is God incarnate. And can there be any greater mystery than this, “…that God the Son of God should take our mortal form for mortals sake.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So I wonder, could it be that “Matthew is offering a tantalizing hint about life for those who have met Christ, [or those who yearn to truly know Him]? Because, knowing Him, nothing is ever the same. You don’t take the old road any longer. You unfold a new map, and discover an alternate path.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This mystery requires that we place ourselves and our future in the hands of One who knows the way through the shadows, across uncharted lands, down rough and rocky paths. It means being met by the power of a loving God whose plans for us are more mysterious and more wonderful than we could ever imagine. To give ourselves over to this journey is to put ourselves in the service of a mystery.

And in thinking about that, I wondered, oddly enough, if you’ve heard of Bombas Socks, because the story of Bombas Socks is the story of acting in service of a mystery. Six years ago, two successful young men came across a statistic on FB that said socks are the #1 most requested item by the homeless. And they thought they could do something about that. So they quit their jobs, spent 2 years of research designing the very best pair of socks ever, and started a company called Bombas Socks. The goal of their company was to donate 1 pair of socks for every pair they sold. They hoped to donate a million pairs in 10 years. As it turned out, they could have been a tad more optimistic. In 3 years they have donated over 5 million pairs of socks! As they have said, that’s 5 million acts of human kindness, 5 million small efforts to make the world a better place. All by two young men who, in the darkness that is homelessness, saw a star and decided to follow.

So in a sense, it’s appropriate that we begin this New Year with the story of the magi and that long ago Epiphany. Because epiphany means “manifestation” and that‘s what our New Year’s resolutions, at their heart, are really all about, a desire that our lives be the manifestation of something bigger than our resume. Because something in us knows we are meant for more, called to more, and we are not mistaken. We are called to be little epiphanies in the lives of others, making manifest the mystery of the incarnate Christ in a shadowy world.

So I wonder if, like the wise men, we might this year resolve to be led by something other than our own need to be always and forever OK? And might we look for what it is in our lives that calls us into mystery? And might we resolve to look for the star in the darkness that is ours to follow --- and then to step out, knowing that the destination still lies ahead of us?

Because every New Year is, in its own way, an epiphany season, the start of an adventure whose finest goal is to be the manifestation of light in a darkened world. Can we live as though we too, like the wise men, have seen that light? It’s not too late to make a New Year’s resolution that matters.

1. *O love, how deep, how broad, how high*, Hymnal p.449 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James C. Howell, *Theological Perspective*, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.1, p.216 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)