



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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A Trinity of Stars

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 6, 2013

The Feast of the Epiphany

Based on Matthew 2:1-12

I adore this story of the Magi's visit. In the crèche of my youth, the members of the Holy Family were a little on the drab side, but the three kings were amazing, resplendently turned out, royal, looking every bit the part—and they were loaded with gifts. It looked like Christmas to me, and all efforts since my youth to demythologize their appearance have been more irritating than elucidating. You know what the scholars teach us: the Magi really don't belong in the nativity scene, having come much later (in Houston, Mississippi, they made it all the way to Bethlehem by Christmas morning); the claim that there may have been a huge gaggle of them, not just three (whatever, the more the merrier); and the most dreadful of all, the notion that their inclusion in the story was in fact literary license to argue Jesus' dominance over or inclusion of the whole world (your choice, dominance or inclusion). Bah humbug to all that! Christmas is not now and never has been about recording history; it is the telling of our story in a way that still defines who we are. This piece of the story is one of our great archetypes, and everything about it is profoundly true in the way that truth matters. We are born to be searchers.

The last time I preached on this passage, I focused on our personal journeys, possible stars we individually follow in search of meaning and purpose. It resonated with a lot of folks because our personal searches are the substance of our lives. Today, though, my thinking is turned more toward what we as a faith community may be seeking. But to set the context, I have listed a few truths I think the "men from the East" teach us about journeys of both varieties, personal and communal. They are pretty simple but really important for us as individuals and for us at St. Bart's.

- ❖ We have to be looking for a star to find one. Having our hearts open to a star means that we admit that some things in our lives need to change.
- ❖ We learn quickly that following rarely occurs in a straight path and that we may look silly to others when we do it. They may even call us hapless dreamers or worse.
- ❖ We have to commit ourselves to the task of discernment, learning to differentiate between authentic stars and some things that are in fact just bright reflections of earthly bling, even though they look like stars.
- ❖ When conditions and clouds block the star from our sight, as inevitably they will, we have to be willing to sit quietly and prayerfully, awaiting further light. Even the best astronomers have to take the occasional night off.
- ❖ At the same time, we must avoid the trap of demanding absolute clarity before we take any action, because hardly anything in life is that clear. Sometimes doing nothing is the right thing to do, giving a little breathing room for evaluation, but it is equally true that sometimes faithful searching means that we take off in the dark and stumble along, doing the best we can until the star gets brighter.
- ❖ And finally we learn that sometimes just like the wise men we have to be willing to change courses to get to our final destination. They came only to pay homage, not to relocate. When it became apparent that the way they had come would not be a safe way by which to return, they reconnoitered: they decided to go home a different way. Sometimes when we are searching for truth, we have to be willing to take an alternative route.

St. Bart's continues to be in a new stage of its life. As we are closing in on two years of transition, I believe there are three stars under the Christ star, which of course has many points of life, we need to follow: the star of growth, the star of preservation, and the star of connection.

First, the star of growth. We need to grow because we have a message and a way of living at the crossroads of an ancient faith and modern life that need to be shared. We are not the only one with it, but we are the only one about which I am speaking right now. What we have to say can change people's lives in the middle of New York City because it points them and us to something much bigger than we are. It can bring hope when despair is more apparent; it can bring clarity of priorities when everything offered by Madison Avenue is much more visible and more expensively advertized. We believe that as weird as it sounds, we can follow Jesus right here in the midst of one of the most wonderful, modern, fabulous, complicated and secular cities in the world. And further we believe that the fact that we often don't follow Jesus as we'd like does not disqualify us from continuing to try!

We also need to grow to take us to places we had no idea we needed to go. Growth will allow us to establish ministries that frankly are at this moment beyond our imagination. New or previously unaddressed needs will become apparent, risks that we had not thought of taking will demand our attention, new opportunities for us to deepen our trust in God will turn up in the most unlikely places. The Christmas narrative after all is all about risk. Mary was bold and brave as she leapt into the unknown with her faith and trust. Jesus came into the world as a baby, as vulnerable as any child embodying the ultimate risk: to be subject to the randomness of this world. As for the wise men, maybe they symbolize us all, who on occasion dare to risk the comfort of our lives to set out for unknown places. Growth means that we will face new ways to be Christ in the world. It makes me crazy with excitement.

Second, the star of preservation. We have bequeathed to us one of the most beautiful sacred spaces in the world. Restoring and preserving it is a star we must follow. This place creaks in holiness and messiness with the lives of many who have gone before us, and it is left to us to protect it for the generations to come who will on occasion come in droves and sometimes in dribbles, here to this place in search of God. It is an onerous responsibility to face the realities of this building everyday, and, yet, it is also one of our most sacred tasks. In this canyon of corporate America, a club of corporate stars, St. Bart's sits like an odd anachronism, its dome marking portals through which the seekers can come, each one radically welcomed as he or she is. As long as that is true about us, or perhaps more accurately as long as we **want** it to be true about us, this is a place worth preserving.

And finally the star of connection. Recently when listening to the popular TED presenter, Brene Brown, I was powerfully struck with something she said. A social worker, storyteller, thought leader, Dr. Brown loves hearing stories of people's lives. In talking about how we connect, she said, "When you ask people about connection, they tell you excruciating stories of 'un-connection.'" Connection is what people are looking for because we have all had such bad experiences of "un-connection," of not fitting or feeling a part. Even people who tepidly come to church with one eye always on the exit door are in fact in search of some kind of connection. There is no one or right way to connect; there is only connection or lack of it. Jesus taught that the basis of connection is love—not tolerance, but love. Nothing about his life suggests that he wanted the church to become a club of like-minded people enjoying one another. He said, "Love in **this** way so that others will know who you are." In a culture that connects the universe to the tip of our fingers on our laptops, there is an epidemic of un-connectedness. Not just so that the church will survive, but because to do so lies at the heart of Jesus' message, the church has to be a place where belonging is generous and wide.

Growth, preservation and connection—these are my dreams for St. Bart's. This year for New Year's I decided to give up resolutions and go instead for following some really great stars. What about you?

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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