

January 4, 2009

Second Sunday After Christmas, Year B (Matthew 2.1-12)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

Our nativity story continues this morning, bringing us the story of the three wise men and their strange journey, sent from Herod to follow a star.

Sent by Herod, sure, but compelled by something else, something intangible and unnamable. The Wise Men, scholars, mind you, not magicians or astrologers or traveling kings, but more like university professors, went off on their journey.

As smart guys, they were probably confused by what they saw. Stars, after all, do not behave like that, traveling across the sky like some sort of celestial GPS system. The wise men had each other's company for the duration and probably, like any good traveling companions, talked about this star along the way, discussing the oddness of the sign, the star's traveling tendencies, making notes about what each thought they might find at the end, maybe discussing the significance of the gifts they brought.

They were gifts for a king, gold, frankincense and myrrh, powerfully symbolic: gold symbolized virtue, the incense frankincense was for prayer and myrrh an anointing oil connoting suffering.

It was a long trip, they didn't know where they were going, they didn't know by what lands or what roads they would get there and they certainly didn't know what they'd find once they arrived.

And when they did arrive, what happened then? They were overwhelmed with joy. They entered the house. They knelt down and paid him homage and offered him their precious gifts, fit for a king.

They found what they were looking for, even though they didn't know what it was when they started.

Who is your star?

Who got you here? The short answer, for many of us, is Jesus.

But even for the lifelong believer. Jesus isn't the whole story.

So who got you here? What bright star did you follow that lead you, defying all astronomical rules, to believe in this unbelievable story? We all got here somehow. What about you?

I am lucky enough to have had several guiding stars in my life, but perhaps one of the most notable came from this place when I was a teenager. I didn't know I was looking for a journey but I found myself on one, guided by a whole constellation, really, but one star in particular.

The one who lead me on this particular road of my journey, though a priest, was not always the prototypical spiritual leader. Loud and gregarious, the brand of faith that he introduced to us could easily be called "not your grandma's Jesus." This leg of my journey often passed through Waffle House, for example, found me having food fights and pillow fights and skipping off for late night FO's at the Varsity. But there was method to this madness. There were lessons about faith in those encounters and sometimes, in spite of them.

I was taught faith through the challenge of the hands-on experience. Backpacking, building, serving, planning, playing, praying. The journey took me to new understandings of faith through relationship and taught me to look for God's face in those around me. The star I followed on this journey pushed me again and again to reject easy answers and simplistic belief systems and helped me, encouraged me even, to struggle again and again with questions and uncertainty.

When I was about 15, in the midst of one of those awkward "what do you want to be when you grow up" conversations that plague the teenage existence, I divulged that I thought well, maybe, I'd sort of kind of like to be a priest. Er, like, whatever.

"Good luck with that," he snorted. "It is a long uphill road. It is a lot of work and some days it will seem like everything and everyone is standing in your way. Think hard about whether you're suited for that."

I've always had a stubborn streak, so well-suited or not, that conversation sealed the deal. Whether he knew it or not, it was the first step on my own long uphill road to ordination.

In the few years that I followed that star, I wasn't sure where I was going most of the time. I certainly wasn't sure how I was going to get there or if I ever would. But I kept following as long as the star kept leading.

So where is your star? Who is your star?

A person, perhaps, that illuminated the faith for you in a way that meant you could finally, finally, let your guard down and believe. An experience of worship,

maybe, that convinced you that this is real and that you were in the right place at the right time.

But here's the thing about stars: Even the best and brightest can only get you so far. For our friends the Wise Men, the star took them all the way to the doorstep - but they had to open the door themselves, totally unprepared for what they'd find behind it. They had to kneel down on their own knees, on their own accord.

They had to remember the gifts they had brought and offer them with reverence.

They had to decide to believe. The star couldn't do any of that for them. The star - that wonderful celestial anomaly that remains indelibly inked in the story of our faith - even *that* star was limited.

How did you get here? What bright light are you following or have you followed in your faith journey?

Very few of us get to a place of belief, even shaky belief, alone, without some sort of inspirational experience or person to guide us in the right direction. But there are steps we have to take alone. In fear and trembling, perhaps, or with naïve bravado.

Faith requires of us that we step out of the comforting light of the guiding star, or we accept it when the star has taken us as far as it can go.

Then we have to put a little trust in ourselves and even more trust in God. We trust. In God. Above all else. To ensure our path is a right and a good and a holy thing and to offer us a safe destination, even if the journey has been difficult.

It is, after all, God in whom the Wise Men put their trust when they left the star and entered the house and God's face that they saw upon entering. And it is so for each of us. When we make the frightening shift from the star who led us there to the one to whom the star is pointing, it is then that the traveling ends and the faith begins.