

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

January 2, 2011
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Jeremiah 31:7-14
 Psalm 84: 1-8

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
 Matthew 2: 1-12

The journey of the wise men

Happy are the people whose strength is in you! whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way. Psalm 84:4

When I think about the three kings, what leaps first to mind are the crèches that I unpack every year a couple of weeks before Christmas. On the piano in the living room I put the tall, earthenware figures of Mary, Joseph, and the baby, of shepherds and sheep, and -- yes -- of the three kings and their camels. On the mantelpiece goes a miniature nativity set in which each teeny-tiny figure is made of clay, delicately painted, and no more than one inch high. On the coffee table I put the plastic figures and the cheap wooden stable that children can play with to their heart's content without making their grandmother worry that something is going to break. No crèche is complete without its three kings, and when the Twelve Days of Christmas are over, back go the various kings and camels into their boxes, where they spend the rest of the year stored in the basement.

As I pondered today's Gospel, I got to thinking: what would happen if the wise men walked out of those crèches and into our lives? What would happen if these figures -- so easy to trivialize as nothing more than decorative props for a mid-winter festival that we pack away when the festival is done -- what if the wise men actually came to life for us? What if their journey informed and deepened our own spiritual search, and propelled it forward? What if their experience of seeking and finding the Christ child was an archetypal journey, one that could lead us into a move vivid and lively relationship with Christ? So I began to read the story for its spiritual significance, as a sacred story about how to grow in intimacy with God.

Four parts of the story stood out for me.

The first, of course, is the star, that mysterious, shining presence that startles the wise men and sends them out on a search. Ancient tradition held that an unusual star could appear in the skies to mark the birth of someone special, such as a king. That is how the wise men interpret what they see: something out of the ordinary is taking place, something truly significant is afoot, and out the

door they go, leaving their ordinary lives behind as they follow the light wherever it leads.

I think it is worth pointing out that although every painting, movie, and Christmas card that depicts the journey of the wise men shows a dazzling star above their heads, we don't actually know from the biblical story whether anyone but the wise men can see that star. King Herod, the chief priests and scribes, don't seem to know anything about the star until the wise men arrive in Jerusalem and tell them about its rising. So the star may be visible to the eye or it may be perceptible only to one's inward sight; it may be seen or it may be unseen. Either way, it is significant, for it signals the birth of something new in the world. It heralds a presence and power that is just now being born. The wise men are wise, indeed, for they spot that star and they set everything aside to follow where it leads.

Probably every spiritual journey begins with a star. At some point we get a sense -- perhaps a very vague one -- that there is something more to life than the ordinary round of tasks and responsibilities, something above and beyond, or perhaps within, material reality that can give a larger meaning and purpose to our days, something that is beautiful and shining and that lights up the world. So we set out on a quest to follow that star and to see where it leads. We may name the quest in different ways -- maybe we call it a search for meaning or wholeness, a search for happiness or peace. Maybe we seek to know that we are loved, or to draw closer to the divine Source of love. Maybe, as some Greeks say to Philip in the Gospel of John, we express our desire in a simple, straightforward way: "We wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21).

However we name that desire, deep down we want to know God. And so, like the wise men, we set out, and what beckons us forward is a star, a subtle, shining presence that keeps company with us, and that we follow as best we can. For most of us, most of the time, following the leadings of God is not like having a GPS fastened to the dashboard of our car, delivering clear-cut instructions: "Turn left in .2 miles; take the freeway; turn right in 4.3 miles." Like it or not, the star of Bethlehem is more elusive than that, so we have to develop an attitude of careful listening, a stance of open inquiry, and a practice of prayer that develops our sensitivity to the glimmers of the holy. It takes practice to stay attentive to the star, for, as Boris Pasternak once wrote, "When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart, and it is very easy to miss it."

The star is the first thing that catches my attention in this story, and the second is Jerusalem. Where does the star lead the wise men? Straight to Jerusalem, straight into the center of political and economic power, where King Herod the Great, a client king appointed by Rome, rules with the same ferocity

that Stalin wielded over his own country in the 1930's. We might wish that following a spiritual path were purely an individual and internal enterprise -- that following the star meant nothing more than developing a personal practice of prayer or going away on periodic retreats. There are plenty of contemporary books and speakers out there that define spirituality in a very individualistic way as being mindful of your own mind and cultivating your own soul -- and of course that *is* part of the journey. But right from the beginning, from the very moment that Christ is born, it is clear that following *his* star also means coming to grips with the social and political realities of one's time. Being "spiritual," for Christians, is not just an interior, individual project of "saving ones soul" -- it also has a civic dimension, a political dimension, and as the wise men faithfully follow the star, they are drawn straight into the darkness and turmoil of the world, where systemic power can be used to dominate and terrify. Without intending it or knowing it, the wise men even contribute to Herod's program of terror, for Herod takes the information that they give him and uses it to order the slaughter of all the children under the age of two who live in Bethlehem.

Following the star evidently means being willing to become conscious of the darkness of the world, and even to perceive how we ourselves are implicated in that darkness. With my taxes, I am paying for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; with every turn of the ignition key, I burn fossil fuels that add to global warming. Until I recognize how I am caught up in and how I contribute to the contradictions and injustices of our political and economic system, I am not following the star and accompanying the wise men into Jerusalem.

We notice, too, that King Herod trembles at the news of the star -- in fact, its rising frightens him. The powers that be are terrified whenever God in Christ draws near, for God's love is always a threat to those powers; it opposes everything in us and around us that is selfish, greedy, and motivated by the urge to dominate, control, and possess. As I read it, the wise men needed to come to know those powers, both within themselves and in the world around them, if they were going to find and follow Christ.

So they entered Jerusalem, and they saw what they saw; they learned what they learned. Then, keeping their eyes on the star, they kept going, "until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy" (Matthew 2:9b-10). This is the third part of the story: the encounter with Christ. What a beautiful line that is -- "when they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." The long, long journey with all its uncertainties and privations, its cold nights and its restless, ardent searching, has reached its fulfillment. The star has stopped, and the wise men can be at peace at last, they have arrived at last, they have found what they were looking for, at last! They enter the house, they see

Mary and the child, and they fall to their knees in a gesture of deep reverence and humility.

Do we know what that's like? Of course we do. We glimpse such moments whenever time seems to stop, when, for instance, our minds grow very quiet in prayer, we surrender our thoughts, and we seem to be filling with light. Or maybe it happens when we gaze at something that captures our complete attention -- maybe a stretch of mountains or the sea, or when we take a long, loving look into a child's sleeping face, or when we are completely absorbed in a piece of music. In moments like these, it can feel as if we are gazing *through* the object on which we gaze, and seeing into the heart of life itself. Love is pouring through us and into us, and all we can do is throw up our hands, fall inwardly to our knees, and offer as a gift everything that is in us, just as the wise men open their treasure chests and offer everything that is in them. Worship is what happens when we come into the presence of what is really real. When we come to the altar rail at the Eucharist, whether we choose to stand or whether we kneel as the wise men did, like them we stretch out our hands to offer everything that is in us, and like them we receive -- we take in -- the living presence of Christ.

Finally, the fourth element of the story is its last line: "... having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road" (Matthew 2:12). In other words, the wise men refused to cooperate with Herod. They deceived him. They resisted him. The wise men have been called the first conscientious objectors in the name of Christ. They are the first in a long line of witnesses to Christ who from generation to generation have carried out acts of non-violent civil disobedience in Jesus' name. The journey of the wise men is our journey, too, for, as Gregory the Great reportedly remarked in a homily back in the 7th century: "Having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came."

So, as we set out together into a new year, I hope that you will join me in keeping the wise men at our side, rather than packing them away in a box somewhere.

Like them, we can attune ourselves to the guiding of the star, and renew our commitment to prayer and inward listening.

Like them, we can enter Jerusalem and all the dark places of our world and soul, following wherever God leads, and trusting that God's light will shine in the darkness.

Like them, we can make our way to Christ, and kneel in gratitude.

And like them, we, too, can rise to our feet with a new-fired passion to be agents of justice and healing, and a renewed desire to give ourselves to God, for "happy are the people whose strength is in [God, and] whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way."