

Sermon by Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell
“Afterglow”

Text—Matthew 2: 1-12

[Note: the sermon is an oral medium. Therefore, the text below may not fully represent what was delivered on January 6, 2013.]

And now, the Christmas season truly is winding to an end for those of us who are twelve day folk. On this date that we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, our trees start to come down, the Christmas cards get put away, and the magi finally arrive at the stable.

As I wrote in my e-Blast column a few weeks ago, I had some trouble this year deciding which of the Christmas decorations would come here to Galena and which would stay with my son in Chicago. I guess I felt like he needed a little help with his preparations, because I did a bit of decorating there—for him. Our tradition, since we went together to Israel/Palestine a number of years ago, was to place the little olive wood crèche that we bought in a shop in Bethlehem on the mantle—you know the routine. Empty manger in the stable, a cow or two there. A little further out, the shepherds and sheep. Farther out still, Mary and Joseph and the donkey. And way down at the east end of the mantle, the wisemen. All of these would move as appropriate as Advent progressed and Christmas arrived. On Christmas Eve, after the late church service, the Christ Child would be placed in the manger. I thought my son might miss this tradition, so I set up that crèche on the mantle as usual.

Well. I went back to Chicago for New Years. As you might guess—only the cows were in the stable, the shepherds were still abiding in the fields, Mary and Joseph had not moved along the road, and the magi were in the far east. And the baby Jesus remained hidden behind the stable. So much for tradition. Or maybe, the tradition was more important for me.

I have long been a fan of observing the twelve days. Even long before I had any idea that I would become clergy and need the rest after Advent and Christmas, it was my time to be quiet and reflect. When we end our celebration on Christmas Day, I think we lose the deeper meaning of the Incarnation, the gift of God to our world. It is not just a momentary miracle that happened 2,000 years ago but a new beginning each year. A new beginning in our faith journeys where we truly receive the gift of Christ’s birth and reflect on our own response to that gift. A new beginning in which we grow in our understanding of Christ as the light of the world and of what that gift of light means to us as people of God—as followers of Christ.

In the afterglow of Christmas day, we can take this time to ponder our own stories and to cherish the gifts of our day-to-day lives, for God has indeed called us to be engaged with our world and the situations in which we find ourselves. But even beyond this, we might look toward the Biblical stories and the examples of those whose vision has transcended the most immediate details of their lives. There is Mary, of course, the young woman who said “yes” to God, choosing a difficult path in the face of scorn and a scandal that might have resulted in stoning. How many women, I wonder, might have said “no, that’s too hard. It might ruin my life?” Yet Mary was able to be open and, without hesitation, responsive to God’s call no matter where it might lead.

The story of the Magi, and their path in following the Star, can be our story, too. The Magi, we are told, were astrologers who interpreted dreams and the movement of the stars. The appearance of a new

star like that of Bethlehem signalled the birth of a king. They could have been content simply to study the star. But instead they were led to follow it, to act on this wondrous and unusual sign. They set out to find and honor that king with valuable gifts suitable for royalty. It was a long and difficult journey, following that star—thousands of miles and countless hardships over mountains and through valleys and across desert wastelands.

We don't know why these wise ones went to such lengths. They were gentiles, after all, foreigners, strangers, not Jews and people of the Law. Was it mere curiosity or scientific inquiry? Or, perhaps, a wider vision that could see beyond the everyday details and toward God's call?

The story of the Magi gives us another lesson, too. Following the light is not always a straight and easy path. But they plodded along, persisting with courage in spite of the rough going, depending, not only on the light of the star. When they strayed from the path, they consulted Scripture and Herod, his chief priests and teachers of the law. They used all of the light they had—all of the resources they could garner. And doing so, found what they were searching for. They found the One sent by God and bowed down, committing themselves to him. And were changed forever, returning home by another way.

For us, following the path of faith, living within the light, is not always about those warm fuzzy feelings that surge through us on Christmas Eve as the flame of the candles passes from person to person to illuminate the sanctuary. Or the wild beating of our hearts as we sing the glorious strains of "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "Joy to the World." It is about persisting with courage in prayer and in hearing and telling the stories that have shaped our people and our lives even when we are not elated about those lives, even when we are fumbling about in the darkness. Most of us will not travel through the desert wilderness on camel back, but we do have our own barriers that must be transcended. Barriers of skepticism and pride and self-centeredness. Vision that is too narrow. And sometimes, we stray from the path and lose sight of the light for a time. Sometimes, we need some extra help.

Loren Eiseley, a professor of anthropology and science, wrote an essay some time ago entitled *The Star Thrower*. This story begins in a time when, in a bout of melancholy, he finds himself on the beaches of Costabel. In the hour before dawn in that hushed pause between night and morning, he watches professional shell collectors at work, their fires and boiling kettles dotting the beach, their "electric torches bobbing like fireflies". The competing collectors seek to outrun those who are less aggressive, and he watches them dump bags of living shells into the water to boil away all living tissue for ornaments that can be sold.

After looking with dejection at the dead creatures strewn on the beach, those that were victims of nature and those of the collector's greed, he rounds a bluff and sees the red glare of the sun just emerging from the horizon. Ahead of him is a gigantic, incredibly perfect rainbow and the figure of a man who seems to be within the rainbow. The man is gazing at something in the sand, and eventually stoops to pick up the object and then fling it out beyond the breaking surf. Then he kneels again. When Eiseley reaches him, he sees a starfish in a pool of sand and silt. "It's still alive," he said. "Yes," the man replies as he picks up the star with a quick yet gentle movement and spins it overhead and far out into the sea. It sinks in a burst of spume, and the waters roar once more. "It may live," the man said, "if the offshore pull is strong enough."

"Do you collect?" Eiseley asks. "Only like this," the man says softly. "And of course, I collect only for the living. The stars throw well," he says. "One can help them." Eiseley walks away in discomfort, believing the star thrower to be mad and his acts to be folly. And yet, not folly at all.

There is possibility for life even against the power of nature and the greed of profit. “Perhaps,” he thought, “far outward on the rim of space, a genuine star was similarly seized and thrown. Somewhere, there is a hurler of stars.”

I believe, my friends, that there is a star thrower, a presence who moves among the difficulties and tragedies of life, when we are lost and off the path, when we cannot find the light. A presence who stoops and retrieves a star, and gently flings it, our star, back into the mystery and wonder of existence. This is the incredible promise of the Christmas message.

The message of Christmas that is one of mystery and wonder. An impossible miracle where God chooses to appear in the least likely of places. In a stable at the birth of a baby to Palestinian peasants. To three strangers from a distant pagan land. To two millennia of the vulnerable and weak and foolish who dare try to follow. God, the star thrower, shows up in the least likely places—to be with the child who is afraid of the dark, with the rich man who has everything but feels empty, with the one who is lonely and lost and unloved. Look, then, for God in the unlikely places—at the foot of the rainbow, in the rocky paths of the wilderness, in the silt and sand where the tide recedes. There stands God, the star thrower, to toss us into the joyful mystery of life where Christmas is not the end but yet another beginning.

A child is born—Emmanuel, God with us. The angels sing, the shepherds tremble, the magi kneel. And stars are thrown.

□

Amen and amen.

[Acknowledgements: The Star Thrower by Loren Eiseley, 1978, The Estate of Loren C. Eiseley and meditation by The Rev. Dr. C. David Owens, “The Star Thrower,” Christmas Eve, 1994.]