The Spirituals of Christmas:  
“BEHOLD THE STAR!”  
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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him... When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.  
(Matthew 2:1-3, 9-12)

When I was a child, the placing of the star on the top of the Christmas tree was the culmination of the process of dressing the tree. We lived on two hundred acres of land outside of Hastings and the back hundred had about a thousand beautiful pine trees someone had planted one time. I don’t think the intent was ever to have a tree farm to sell trees for Christmas. Indeed, they had grown far too tall for most homes, but they were ideal for our old converted farm house with a fifteen foot ceiling in the living room. We would select a grand tree, cut it down, and haul it to the house behind a little tractor we had. When we had it positioned, all the ornaments and tinsel draped over the magical monstrosity, I would lean over from the open loft, which served as my bedroom, with the star in my hand—the most important ornament of all. Precariously holding on to the railing, I would place the star at the pinnacle of the tree.

At the time I didn’t know it, but the awe I felt in placing that Christmas star was part of a rich and long tradition. In various ways, reverence for the Christmas star has been seen in almost every part of the western world. At Christmastime, for generations, Swedish boys and girls have processed in tall white hats trimmed with stars. In Oberammergau, Germany, singers in the Passion Play follow the star with a large, star-shaped lantern, and stop to sing carols at the
church, the post office, and various homes. In Spain and Italy, people wait until the first star appears on Christmas Eve before beginning their Christmas celebration. And in some European countries, young girls would go out into the fields during the Christmas season to pray to the stars to bring them husbands.

And, of course, the star is celebrated in our Christmas music. “There’s a song in the air, there’s a star in the sky.” We sing, “O holy night, the stars are brightly shining.” And, what would Christmas be without:

*Star of wonder, star of night, Star of royal, beauty bright.*
*Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*

But the brilliance of a star is just too much for our language. I think the unknown persons who gave us this spiritual about the star were wise in the way they sang. They didn’t attempt to describe the star; they simply cried out in awe:

*Behold the star!*
*Behold the star up yonder!*

*Behold the star!*
*It is the star of Bethlehem.*
*A star has risen clear and bright—Behold the star of Bethlehem.*
*It speaks of One who is the Light—Behold the star of Bethlehem.*

The spiritual really says no more. After all, what can you say about a special star except “Behold! Behold!” Awe and wonder must take over from there. But this star was special, coming to symbolize so much we need in our lives.

The United Methodist Church has long had a prominent building in the heart of Washington, D.C., right next to the Capital Building. It was originally built to carry on our denomination’s witness to our country and the world. In it is a chapel, Simpson Memorial Chapel, named after a close friend of President Abraham Lincoln, and it is a site for prayer and for worship. Some years ago, in early December, one of our United Methodist ministers, himself a descendent of slaves, spoke about his faith and his family. He said:

My great grandfather, William P. Walker, escaped from slavery and fled to Ohio, yet felt he still was not free. So he determined to head for Canaan land (translated Canada), and crossed the Ohio River (just like the Jordan), and for several weeks he laboriously hid by day, scavenged for food by night, and in the quiet of the darkness, he would look to the sky, and find the North Star, and set his inward compass towards the north, until early one morning he crossed over into a campground. And on the way, he joined other refugees, as they sang together,

*Behold the star, behold that star up yonder,*
*behold the star, it is the star of Bethlehem!*
To former slaves, traveling North, the star was a sign of liberation and direction. They knew God would send them a star to guide them. They associated following the North Star to following the star of Bethlehem and so with freedom and life.

For me, and perhaps for you, a star is an object of wonder. We know how distant stars are, and how large. Someone sent me an email that showed the relative size of Earth compared to Jupiter, the largest planet, and the Earth looked like a marble next to a basketball. And then our sun was brought into the picture: Jupiter was like a marble and Earth was just a grain of sand compared to the sun. But then our sun was compared to some larger stars. It looked like a little “BB” next to the star Arcturus. And then in the next comparison, Arcturus was like a piece of buckshot next to the enormous star Antares which is 1,000 light years from Earth and still one of the brightest stars in the sky. In comparison to Antares, our sun is like a single pixel next to a beach ball. All of this leaves me in wonder, just as it did the ancients.

So it’s no surprise that the stars held great significance for the ancients. They were the best map in all the world. Astronomy is the oldest of the sciences for good reason. Stars are a wealth of knowledge. Out in the vastness of the ocean, or in the hypnotic sameness of a desert, travelers could locate themselves by noting the position of the stars. By the time of Christ, many basic laws of astronomy had been discovered. The stars are so predictable in their course that a system of mathematics had been built around them, adding to their mystery and importance.

There were, by Christ’s time, people who spent their lives studying the stars. Here they were the wise ones, Magi from the east who had been studying the heavens. Their experience was both scientific, and mystical and religious. They followed a star, convinced that it would lead them to the place where a new King of the Jews was to be born.

What a crazy idea: to follow a star. You and I, I’m sure, are too sophisticated to ever do such a thing. Where did they get that notion? The belief in that time was that stars were the sign of the birth of a great person, that somehow the greater universe mirrored, in larger form, the events that were happening here on earth. Maybe they had read the prophecy which said “a star shall come forth out of Jacob.” However it was, these Magi journeyed a long difficult path, looking for a king, and led by a star.

And then, just when they were getting close, it seemed that their guidance system failed them. When they got to Jerusalem, they didn’t know where to go next. Perhaps it just seemed right to them that the Messiah would be born in the capital city. For the zillionth time now, I’ve read the cute little joke about how things would have been different “If the Magi Were Women.” If you have that in your outbox, you really do not need to send it to me. It goes like this: What would have happened if there had been three wise women instead of three wise men? You know where this is going: the three wise women would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and given practical gifts the family could use.

Maybe so. The truth is, however, that the Magi did ask directions. They went all through Jerusalem asking, “Were is he? Where is he? Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?
For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.” And Herod hadn’t even noticed the star.

The central question this morning is: Why did these wise men set out on their journey? Even if they were astrologists and they saw this star, what were they seeking that would lead them to take such a risk? Why would they leave the security of home and position, making a long, difficult, dangerous journey to find...what? According to psychiatrist Beatrice Moses Hinkle: “There is one great and universal wish of humankind expressed in all religions, in all art and philosophy, and in all human life; they wish to pass beyond ourselves as we are.” Transcendence. Others use words like “heaven,” “Nirvana,” “enlightenment,” or in our time, “self-actualization.” Deep inside, these wise ones knew there was more.

The magi were restless. They were earnest spiritual seekers. And Matthew wants to say we all are. Or rather, we all need to be. For we all are on a spiritual pilgrimage to find God. Fifty years ago now, Bob Dylan, who just won the Nobel Prize for literature, wrote “All Along the Watchtower,” one of his classics. One powerful line of it goes like this: “No reason to get excited,” the thief, he kindly spoke. “There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke. But you and I, we’ve been through that, and this is not our fate. So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.”

Maybe at some point in your life, you thought that life had “no meaning, no purpose.” Maybe at some point in your life, you thought that “life is just a joke.” But you and I, we’ve been through that, have we not? I am compelled to believe that anyone who has made the effort to be here this morning knows that this is not our fate. There is more to life than our culture, our world, tell us. There is more to life than “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” More than simply satisfying our need for food and water and shelter, and then of finding safety and security, and even more than finding love, and maximizing our self-esteem. Do we not all know that there is something more going on in this life? And have we not all caught glimpses of that great One we call God moving within course of human events, and disrupting, even uprooting our lives?

Augustine prayed in his Confessions: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We, too, are restless—because we know there is more to life than what we’ve been told. So some people change jobs every two or three years. Some people rearrange the furniture every few months. Others move to a new city. Still others experiment with drugs or foods or friends or the newest technology or the latest fashion. I love the New Yorker cartoon that had this Neanderthal walking boldly away from a group of cavemen around a fire. He is saying, “Enough of this primitive (stuff)!” We all get restless. We want to run away and start over. And sometimes maybe we should. But we can’t run away from the deep awareness that there is far more to this life.

We set our focus today on a distant star which flared two thousand years ago. But I want to commend you, right now, to the inner journey of your spirit. Please understand this. Those ancient Wise Men followed that star because it was leading them on a spiritual journey. It was the greatest adventure of their lives. But we, no less than the Magi, are on a spiritual journey as well. Because there is a God, there is a star for you. But that star is not hanging in the heavens, or on a tree. It is the star of God’s Spirit filling you with a restlessness that forces you not to be
content with what the world tells you about the purpose of life. And if, in response to God’s leading, you are seeking that “star,” you will find yourself on the greatest adventure life can hold. So watch for God’s stirring in your life; watch for that star. Don’t be blind. Watch for God’s star, God’s leading. When discouraged, don’t give up. Don’t turn away. Don’t get stuck in a rut because it’s comfortable and easy. Open your eyes to the Kingdom of God, and when you see God’s light, go for it. In the spiritual quest for God, don’t settle.

I don’t know what the journey will mean for you. I don’t know where the light of your star might lead you. It could lead you far away from where you are today. It could take you to confront the ruling powers in the capital city or it could lead you to find a poor child in some forgotten village who needs your gifts. It may very well leave you where you are but call you to go deeper within yourself to find what you are seeking.

But take the journey and follow your star. And never doubt that God is urging you to follow. Don’t stop believing that there is more to this life. I dare say the reason Herod did not see the star, and is so violently startled by the Magi, is that he had turned a blind eye to the reality of God—and the last thing he wanted to do was watch for a star to guide him.

Matthew wants to tell us that God is here to be found. God is here, Matthew tells us, but not where we expect. God comes among us but in surprising disguises: a peasant child in a rural village, an infant, a flesh and blood person, perhaps the one next to you. This is the story of the Bible, is it not? God is always surprising us, not least those of us who are ‘experts’ on God. Just when we think God has forgotten us, there is a burning bush or a smoking mountain, the parting of a sea, a child that is born, the healing of a disease, a sudden light, an unexpected knock at our door, or a resurrection after a cross. Just when we think we have nailed God down in some ritual done just right, or some moral code defined as ancient and holy, just when we lock God up in some temple or some tomb of the past, God says, “No, I’m not there, I’m right here with you now.”

When you follow God’s star, God’s leading, and find the one who is promised, I suspect that you will follow the Magi’s example by giving yourself up to the mystery and offering your best gifts, just as the Wise ones offered gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And when you return to your home, like the Wise ones, you will travel by another way, for your life will be changed.

So, behold—and follow—that star. Your star may come like a miracle, like that star which shone so brightly the Magi just knew it was a beacon from God. Or your star may be right in front of your nose: a friend, a stranger, an opportunity, an ordinary matter that God may use for your journey.

Behold that star, good friends. Behold the star up yonder. Or over there. Or deep in here. God still sends Christ’s light into our lives. God still leads us to where the Messiah may be found. Follow that star today. Still today, there is light and life waiting to be born in you.

May we pray? Living God, you are the possibility of every moment, the potential of every person, the promise of every hope. You put before us the Star of a better world, of peace, hope,
joy, and love. O God, give us courage to move forward in our journey. Give us the comfort of guiding stars and sound directions and glimpses of the goal from time to time. In those places and times where we get stuck, bogged down by fears and frustrations, weariness and weakness, free us and push us to continue. And may we never stop seeking you until you bring us home. Amen.

1. Matthew 2:2