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Beginning Anew

A sermon given by
Rev. Rev. Dr. Peter A. Luckey
On Sunday, January 3, 2010

Imagine yourselves, just for a moment, traveling with the wise men, the three kings coming from the East. Imagine that you are part of the caravan traversing the desert. Imagine what you hear: the sound of camel hooves trudging through the desert. Imagine what you smell: the smell of animals and camel's hair matted down, sweaty with possessions and belongings and gifts to be presented to the Christ child. Imagine what you feel: at night the clear, cold air sharp against your cheek, breathing out and breathing in. You can see your breath and maybe you can even hear at night the howl of the coyote.

You are out in this desert landscape. The going is slow, for sure. You look far up ahead and you look to the west. You see the craggy mountain ranges, and there in the western sky you look up and you see a star.

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

Imagine these intrepid explorers making their way across deserts and mountains, coming from such a long way from a far country on this journey, on this pilgrimage, slowly, deliberately making their way following the light. Imagine for a moment—no Global Positioning System, no computerized navigational help, no cell phone and ugly cell phone towers, no I-pods to keep them entertained along the way. No hotel where they can get a hot shower at night to wash away the dust of the desert, no toilet with running water, no heated bed at night to rest their weary bones. Think of them out in the desert, trudging. Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.

If we can imagine being on that journey with them, following that star, we might wonder today about our star to follow. Where is the lamp for our feet? Where is the light for our path?

Here we are at the beginning of a brand new year, a new decade, still getting used to writing 2010 on our checks. What we know so well is the relentless passing of time. Oh yes, we make a big to-do about the New Year with champagne glasses twinkling and that gigantic ball coming down at Times Square in new York City and everybody singing Auld Lang Syne, but Father Time is oblivious to it all. He marches on and he stops for no one.

We ask ourselves throughout our pilgrimage through life: Where is our guide? Who will show us the way? Or are we aimless wanderers running helter-skelter through life, not sure where it is all headed?

What we are sure of is that time's passage is relentless. Is time our servant or our master? We do know this: the older we get, the faster it goes. Each succeeding year that flies by seems to go faster than the previous one. Years go by like months and decades like years.

We no more than store away our Christmas lights and our garlands and our ornaments and put them in boxes and haul them up to the attic, than we know we are going to be up in that attic again, pulling out those boxes and lights and bringing them down again and setting them up again for another Christmas. That's how fast it seems to go. Time flies. Tempus fugit irretrievably.

We cannot help but be aware of what has been left in time's wake. Familiar landmarks and touchstones we have counted on are now gone. We hear more, these days, about what we have lost from the past than what we expect to find in the future. With the passing of the first decade of a new millennium, I hear more ruminating about what is behind us than what may lie ahead. After 9/11 have we lost a sense of ourselves as an impregnable place, safe from the world's dangers? Have we lost our innocence as a nation? And maybe just in time.

I wonder, too, if we have lost our brand of American optimism, a can-do spirit—"Yes, We Can"—that says we are still the land of opportunity, and tomorrow is still the new frontier. To be honest, it is hard to rally such a spirit to convince ourselves that the future belongs to us, when our future as a country is so burdened by our present. I am thinking now of our public debt. I Googled "What is the public debt of the United States of America?" The number I got is 7.4 trillion dollars. I have no idea how much money that is; I can't imagine the 7.4 trillion dollars that we are now in debt as a nation. This debt keeps piling up relentlessly as the ticking of a clock, as one year folds into the next and we wonder what it is that we are bequeathing to our children and our grandchildren.

How many ways does it feel that time has us on the ropes, our lives fleeing by like sand in an hourglass? Through all this, we could be forgiven if we were to find ourselves envying the three kings walking that slow pace of the desert. Envy the three Kings without their GPS, without their cell phones, without their technology, lacking hot water, and all the amenities, because what they had was not inconsiderable. What they had was a purpose. They had a mission. They had a guide and they had a light.

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It's really an ancient story, isn't it, this story of the star and the Wise Men coming from the east? You may or may not take this story as literally, factually, historically true as if there were some astronomical anomaly of a light hanging in the sky.

What I do know is this: the story is true! It's true in the sense that it points us to the truth that was revealed to us in the Gospel of John. The truth is this: the light of the word of God, the word that was in the beginning with God and was God and that all

creation was made through that word. That light came into the world and dwelt in the midst of the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

The most extraordinary truth of all is that this light, this word came and dwelt among us. The word became flesh, full of grace and truth. What we celebrate this morning is not only divinity descending to humanity but we celebrate also humanity being elevated to divinity. God makes a home with us. "I will come and make a home among them," Jesus says to his disciples in the Gospel of John.

This light is the Word of God, the very same God who makes such amazing promises to people who were exiled and ravaged and sacked and dislocated; the God who says, "Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, 'Save, oh Lord, your people.' See, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her who is in travail, together; a great company, they shall return here." This same God that gave the ancient people a homecoming gives us a homecoming too.

The three Kings had their sign. They had their light. They had their star to lead them and to show them the way. And though we don't often recognize it or sometimes don't receive it, we have our light to show us the way. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, that light need not be a star that's billions of light years away from us; it is a light that is here with us right now. It's why Jesus came to reveal that light here in our midst. Even with all our foibles and all our limitations, the light is here among us. That is why, when the great painters of the Renaissance wanted to show divinity and humanity, they put halos, a blue nimbus of light, over the heads of the saints.

Perhaps we ourselves have had moments, glimpses when we saw divinity in the midst of humanity. Maybe it was just a glow and a twinkle of the eye, maybe it was just a smile or a laugh, but we were sure we were in the presence of the light, and when we saw that light, we knew we were on the right path.

A writer named Mary Karr, writing a piece in the New York Times last Sunday, wrote about visiting a dying priest by the name of Father Kane. A stroke had paralyzed both his legs and withered one hand. A stomach tube was feeding him and his shallow breaths were interrupted by ragged coughs. The melanoma twice taken off his scalp had grown back and crusted black and big as a quarter. She was worried she wouldn't get to see him before he died.

"Aren't you mad at God?" she asked him. He tipped his head to consider. "Not yet." Mary had been a lifelong Atheist before she visited Father Kane's church, dragged there by her grade school son. She says, "Those first Sundays I toted a paperback to pass the time...but after a year or so I'd surprised pals by getting baptized. Maybe only that blue-eyed Irishman was a fit enough theological ninja to convert me," she writes. "He met my doubts with his trademark delight."

She went to visit him again in December and worried how she would find him. The melanoma had quadrupled in size. She stopped by the gift shop and splurged on a four dollar poinsettia. When she gave him the poinsettia, he said to her, "Let's take the poinsettia down to the chapel for the blessed mother."

She writes, "I followed the humming chair into the elevator. He kept the flower balanced on his lap. Father Kane wheeled to the far corner where a slightly abstract icon of Mary and Baby Jesus barely reached his knee. Mary said to Father Kane: 'I hate that God let you suffer like this!' 'Oh,' he said, taken aback, 'God suffers more!'"

Then she writes: "He bid me place the flower first to one side of the statue and then the other. 'Looks good there,' he finally said, grinning up at me behind wire rims, his pale eyes crinkled, his cheeks flushed as if he had just finished the polka."

That ends the story of a simple tale of one woman and her dying priest bringing a simple poinsettia to a statue of the baby Jesus and Mary in a chapel in a hospital. They were for that moment like the wise men bringing their gifts to the baby Jesus!

In a real sense, that story is all of our stories of how, when we are on the journeys in the direction of the light, moving toward the light, seeking to find Him and bearing our gifts to Him, all this nonsense about aimless wandering melts away. We see that, yes, held in the majesty and mystery of the light, that the fullness of time is here now. We see so clearly that the light that is here among us is within our grasp.

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Amen.