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## *How Do We Know It's God?*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell**  
**The Second Sunday after Christmas, Year C**

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you have been with us during the Christmas season, you know by now that our largest service is the Children's Pageant on Christmas Eve. Now the dean thinks he understands why. There's no sermon at that service. But the dean goes on to speculate that we have not one preacher, but many preachers as the children gather to tell us the story of the birth of the Christ child.

Now, my favorite character in that story is the lead star. It is the lead star who ushers all the children into the nave as we sing, *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. It is the lead star who takes its place right in front of the altar and lets us know where the holy family is gathered there on the steps around the baby Jesus. And when the story is told, and we are singing *Once in Royal David's City* at the top of our lungs, it is the lead star who is taking all of the children out. I love the lead star because I think the lead star signals for us the presence of God. Signals for us the mystery of God. Makes sure that we don't forget it because wherever the star is, there the presence of God can be experienced.

Now you know the story of the three wise men who come from the East. They follow the star to Bethlehem. They find the baby Jesus there. They give him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, they worship him, and then have the wisdom not to go back to Herod. They take another road home. But I always wondered, how did they pick that star? I mean, of all the stars in the dark, clear night sky, how did they pick that one? What was it about the experience of seeing that star that signaled that they would follow it to experience the mystery of God? More importantly, what can we learn from this story about how we can notice the lead star in our lives?

Now, the lead star is also known as the Star of Bethlehem because that's where it took them, to Bethlehem, to the birth of Jesus. And the wise men are generally known in Matthew as Magi. They weren't just wise men. They were probably Zoroastrian astrologists from the East, that is to say Persia, that is to say modern-day Iran. These were people who had been studying the heavens and the stars, all of their adult lives. They were scholars.

So I think if you look at the story of their pilgrimage, you can find five marks or signs of the presence of God. And if we can get a sense of these signs, we might be able to see the Star of Bethlehem as it rises in our own lives.

So here they are: depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth. Depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth. Now, I know what you're thinking. That's a lot to remember, but stay with me. As I normally do, I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know. And one of these signs, one of these marks, is going to strike you as being interesting. Pay attention to that one.

The first sign is depth. Now, when I say depth, what I mean is a depth of soul or spirit. It's not a place you go to as much as it is a place you come from. It's normally a place you find after practice, getting to know yourself, surrendering to God, gives you a sense of depth. And coming from that place allows you to respond to the world without reacting to it. It expands your capacity to experience the presence of God. I imagine that the Magi were scholars of depth. That time they had spent learning about the heavens and the stars allowed them to see a star that other people could not see. You will remember that Herod, once told the star existed, still needed the Magi to tell him where Jesus was. Neither Herod nor his experts could apparently find the star to follow. To see

the star may require some depth, may require some capacity for the experience of God. But when you're touched at that depth, you know it.

The second mark is future. And when I say future, what I mean is a eager willingness to move forward into the future, trusting in God even when you don't know what to expect, even when you know it will be something that you could not have possibly imagined. This of course, is exactly what the Magi did, abandoning their home and families to follow this star into a foreign land carrying gifts, which might suggest they expected a more regal ruler to be at their destination. But their commitment to a future they could not imagine is one of those marks of the presence of God. It must have been enough for them simply to follow the star. Their commitment to the trip must have been born of some sense that this was of God.

The third mark is freedom. Now, when I talk about freedom, I mean both freedom from and freedom for. Freedom from constraints that imprison you like jealousy and greed or envy. Those things that capture who you are and prevent you from being fully alive. That's what the seven deadly sins are all about, by the way, the idea of passions that capture you and imprison you and how to free yourself from them to be more fully alive. But liberating yourself from those constraints only gives you freedom for, that is to say, freedom to follow God, the ability to be committed to following God regardless of what it means for you. And this of course is just what the Magi did. They followed the star. They were free to do so, free to leave who they were, free to go to a strange place, and free to be enthralled by the God they found, which must have been much different from what they expected. Freedom.

The fourth is beauty. This perhaps is not so hard to imagine. It's simply that sense of awe and wonder that harmony and form can give us. The Magi understood beauty. You can see it in our pageant. They're wearing the best clothes, the wise men, but their understanding of beauty was so great that they could see the beauty in Mary holding a child at the manger, when what they expected was undoubtedly the royal palace of Herod. They had such a sense of beauty that they could be awed and filled with wonder by the simple presence of God in the manger when there was no room in the inn.

And finally, truth. Truth is simply the alignment with reality. But as the Bible uses the term, I mean knowing, a subjective knowing, a knowing that comes from relationship. Not just an awareness of an object you can measure or manipulate or control, but a knowing that leaves you in relationship with whatever it is, whether it's another person or a tree or a rock or a star. It's that kind of truth that aligns you with real reality.

So depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth. All of these things I think are marks. When you find them, you have entered into a mystery where you will also find the presence of God. Not a mystery, like a problem to be solved, but a mystery like entering into some truth that the farther you get into it, the more you realize you know nothing about it. That kind of mystery. That's what God promises us, depth, future, freedom, beauty and truth. You can think of those as the five points of the Star of Bethlehem, if that helps.

But there is a common element. To enter into this mystery, represented by all five of these marks is to fulfill a longing, a yearning. When we encounter it, we intuitively want it. We want to be part of it, we want to participate in it, and yet at the same time, we're afraid of it. We're afraid of giving ourselves over to it and it not being able to sustain us. That's why we find ourselves moving in and moving out of mystery. As attractive as it is, it is also frightening because we don't control our own future in mystery.

Now, if all this has been a little abstract, I want to offer you a personal example. We have a teenage boy at home. He goes to school, which means every morning is an adventure. Maybe you've been there. I have my own sense of when he should get up, what kind of clothes he ought to wear, exactly how to go about all of the personal hygiene that adolescent boys benefit from and what time we ought to be leaving. He let us know this year that he was tired of that, that he thought he was now old enough to make his own decisions and that he could get himself to school. He appreciated the ride, but otherwise he'd be in charge of his morning. Thank you.

This would be the rising Star of Bethlehem because there was something there that you did feel a depth. There was some awareness of his desire to grow up, to be an individual, to be independent, to be in charge of himself that you felt, that you wanted to grant him. Because after all, what are you supposed to do as a parent? Raise these children to be fully alive, right? And yet it's a little bit frightening. What I really want is to follow my agenda because it works. You're walking into a future you can't imagine. Are we going to get to school or not? I don't know. There's a certain amount of freedom. I've got to be free of my own desire to control. I've got to be free of my own fear of guilt or shame when I walk into the office to explain why this child who hasn't combed his hair is late for school.

And there's a truth there. There's an acceptance of the reality that it's time for him to do this on his own. And there's something about just being in relationship with him as he does it, which is its own reward, and there's

also a beauty to it. In this case, the beauty came in the form of humor because you can imagine the very first day things just didn't happen the way I envisioned them. So finally, when I thought all is lost, I encouraged his mother to go up and make sure he was alive. She went up gently to the top of the stairs and said, "Robert, are you out of bed yet?"

From the other side of the closed door came his response, "Trust the process, mom." Trust the process. In due time, he emerged from the room, fully dressed, teeth brushed, hair combed, ready to leave when we were supposed to leave. They got to school exactly the right time. This is no small thing. He's at a school where if you're five minutes late leaving the house, you were 30 minutes late getting to school because that's what traffic does to you.

But the point is not that he was on time or he'd done everything he was supposed to do, is it? The point is that we were able somehow to recognize the Star of Bethlehem that was rising in our house. They'd called for us to step away, to give ourselves up so he could grow to nurture him and his path of drawing closer to God. So you can remember the five points of the star, depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth. Or you can just remember that there is the presence of God, which is a mystery, and to enter into it, once we learn what it looks and feels like is a joy. It takes some courage, trust me, and trust the process.

Amen.