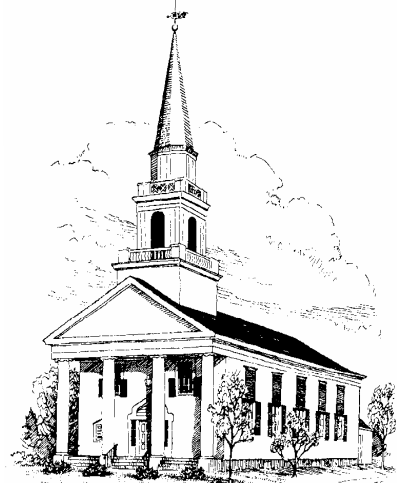


# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 6, 2008  
Rev. Barbara J. Libby  
**“Follow the Star”**

Scriptures:  
Isaiah 60:1-6  
Matthew 2:1-12



A country doctor came to a farmhouse late one night to help deliver a child. As the mother labored, her husband assisted the doctor by holding up a gas lamp to illuminate the makeshift delivery room. After a time of courageous labor, the mother delivered a fine baby boy. Then, to the surprise of both parents, the doctor announced that a second child was due to arrive. And, indeed, the mother delivered a lovely baby girl. Her husband was already shaken by this unexpected turn of events, so you can imagine his surprise and astonishment when he heard the doctor say, "Wait! I think there's a third! I think we have triplets!" At this, the father began to back out of the room. "Come back!" called the doctor. "Come back here with that lamp" "Oh, no," said the father, "it's the light that attracts them!"

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, we are conscious of both birth and light. We hear Isaiah invite us to rise and shine, for the light has come. Matthew helps us visualize the mysterious magi making their way over a long, long distance to visit a new born child,— all the while following the light of a wondrous star.

Somehow, the true light born into the world at Christmas does make our birth into new life possible. Somehow, the light does draw us out of the darkness into a new existence. If it is true that revelation is not so much about God appearing as it is about us coming out of hiding to see God, then it is indeed the light that attracts us!

In these twelve days after Christmas, in these twelve short days following Christmas day, our work is to rejoice in God's coming to us. Today begins a new season of Epiphany when we become attuned to our movement toward God.

The magi from the east are the symbols of that journey toward God. The magi are symbols of that persistent, patient, sincere search for the one born king of the Jews. These wise men were astrologers, people who studied their star charts. Their lives were all caught up in reading and interpreting signs in the heavens as well as signs given in dreams. They knew that something extraordinary was going to happen. Once the stars did align, as they anticipated, they saw the light and followed the star, trusting the illumination that was provided for them, confident in the light shining out of the darkness. They must have known that they were guided by God all along their journey.

The poet T. S. Eliot, in his poem "The Journey of Magi", has these strange travelers wonder as they think back on that long and arduous journey. Eliot has the magi wonder about all that took place on that journey and they reflect on it:

*“All this was a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it again, but set down this, set down this: were we led all that way for birth or death?”*

The magi understood that, with the birth of this child, things would change. The old world shifted. The ancient prophecies were brought to life with this birth at Bethlehem.

Even in our time, I believe there exists a deep yearning for guidance, for direction, for leadership. We long to be given advice and counsel about exactly what to do next so that everything will turn out all right.

A Canadian survey a few years ago indicated that fully 88% of those interviewed knew their astrological sign and 50% read their horoscope at least once a month. Only half as many read the Bible with the same frequency. Our flirtation with astrology is merely one indicator of our desire to be guided by a power outside ourselves. Many of the tools and materials used by new-age practitioners speak to this fascination with mysterious powers and cosmic signs and mystical guidance. Yet side by side with that longing for direction is our resistance to it for we also confess to a fascination with controlling our destiny and managing our lives, on our own, thank you very much, without any outside or even heavenly interference!

Many cling to the security of claiming a rational faith in an irrational world. Many pride themselves on not having to check our brains at the door when we attend worship. Many rejoice in the solid rational base of Christian scholarship, enlightenment, and knowledge which built the great universities, spread literacy, and launched western civilization.

Yet we need more than reason, analytical thought, and logic. Something is missing if we try to reduce everything to rational thought alone. As important as it is to bring our intellect, curiosity, and discernment to our faith journeys, we also need to be open to the mysterious workings of God which cannot always be analyzed or categorized. So much of the story of Christmas and Epiphany is also a story about mystery at work in this world.

On this Epiphany Sunday, let's think about all that the wise men or magi did not know as they set out on their journey. Like many biblical characters before and after them, they set out on a journey not knowing where it would take them. They did not know how long the trip would be when they decided to follow the star that appeared in the east. They did not know how they would be received in the faraway foreign land. They did not know what the king would look like nor did they know when or if they would ever return home. Yet they chose to make the journey in spite of all the unknowns trusting in the mystery.

Following the light of God, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a journey of similar trust. We may feel that we don't know where our journey will lead us, and we certainly do not know what we will find along the way. Like the wise men, we can trust that God goes *before* us and that God goes *with* us and that the journey is never in vain. The magi were drawn onward even though they did not have all of the answers. They journeyed—risking danger and disappointment—not knowing where they were being led.

Likewise, if we are to know God, we, too, must trust God to guide us and lead us. Only then can we set off after the star that shines for us. There is a star for each one of us to follow—a purpose to our lives, a way to make a contribution, a meaning to our existence. In order to see that star, we must look up, we must watch, and stay alert.

There is a true story about a 16-year-old boy in Bishop, Texas who began sky-watching with a homemade telescope that cost him only \$7.50 to build. On his third night of watching the night sky, this teenager, named Mark Whitaker, discovered a new comet. With the help of a professional astronomer from Harvard, the comet was confirmed, and named Whitaker-Thomas to recognize this teenager's extraordinary accomplishment.

The magi were star-watchers by trade; that is how they earned their living. When God wanted to give them a message, God used the medium with which they were most familiar. Perhaps our stars appear in our everyday lives, in our work and living and interests. Perhaps our stars are there all along guiding us onward, calling us to truth, beckoning us onward toward God.

During our offertory time this morning, a basket will come around with stars. I invite each of you to take an Epiphany stargift—a simple star on which is written one word, a quality or attribute or characteristic.

We borrow this tradition of the stargift from many other churches who treasure the reminder of the gifts which come unexpectedly from God into our lives and provide meaning and guidance. Through my own years of ministry, I can testify to some amazing stories about the way a stargift received by a believer has changed their life. Some churches continue the tradition of sharing stargifts from year to year, sharing stories about how their stargift at Epiphany impacted their year.

Let the stargift provide food for thought in this new year. Let your stargift be a reminder of the new birth which comes through the light of Jesus Christ. Put your stargift somewhere you can see it regularly—perhaps on your computer, refrigerator door, bulletin board, or on a bathroom mirror. Put your stargift somewhere you can see it daily. Let it encourage you to consider how God provides for you. Let it encourage you to ponder the gifts God gives you so generously. Let your stargift invite you to go where God guides you through the events and challenges of this new year.

I want to be clear about what we are doing with these stargifts: there is an element of fun and anticipation in comparing stargifts. We are not playing at prophecy here. This is not magic or a parlor game. Let your star gift serve as a reminder that God does speak to us, that God does communicate with us in sometimes unusual ways. When the basket comes by you, don't choose the star, let it choose you! Read it and breathe with it and accept that there might be a message there for you; or the message may come later. The word you choose may be unexpected. It may come to you as a nudge or an encouragement to do or consider something in the days ahead.

God may communicate with you through your stargift. God may communicate with you through the words of a friend. It may be that you gain new insight from a book or a play or a movie, from a dream, or from your own thoughts and prayers. God is sometimes disclosed through moments with a sense of significance as if everything dances into place. The important thing is to be aware and be ready for God's presence and God's surprises.

Be warned: following a star can bring unexpected changes of direction! After the magi followed the star to see the Christ child, they went home by a different route, changed by their experience, wary and suspicious of what King Herod had in mind. They traveled home by another road.

Following a star can bring unexpected changes in our life. Following a star can bring unexpected changes to us and to this church. This star business and the light from the light of the world can attract others who might feel compelled to come to us and see what is going on here at the Mystic Congregational Church. Be warned: following a star can bring unexpected changes of direction!

The more open we are to God's guidance and the mystery of God's presence in our lives, the more likely it is that we will travel a different route through this new year. Let us place our trust in God. Let us seek guidance and direction from the star, from the source of true light. Let us move into this new year with confidence and trust. Be warned: following a star can bring unexpected changes of direction!

Amen.

*(Acknowledgement is here given to a sermon  
preached at South Church, New Britain, January 1997  
by The Reverend Katherine Fagerburg)*