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**CHRIST CHURCH, CHRISTIANA HUNDRED**

*“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” Matthew 2:2*

There are few more familiar bible passages than one - embedded and associated as it is with our collective memories of the Christmas stories of Jesus' birth. The Three Wise Men and their camels are part of every Christmas crèche set. In the Episcopal Church where I grew up, the grandly staged entrance of the Wise Men to rolling melody of “We Three Kings of Orient Are” was always a climatic moment in the annual parish Christmas pageant. And, yes, in our parish they always recruited tall, teenaged boys complete with glue-on beards, paisley bathrobes, and gold crowns to bear the symbolic gifts. Oh, I hated it. It was just so embarrassing. And, I can promise you that any photographs of me dressed as one of the three kings were long ago destroyed. Still moments like these, solemn, joyful, endearing, and embarrassing are how we grow in faith and how the church becomes our home. How grateful I am, as I visit our churches, our Episcopal schools, Camp Arrowhead, our after-school tutoring & childcare ministries today, and see the many good things done so that young people, their families, and the world will know that the Episcopal Church loves children. Thank you.

But, this story about the Wise Men and the Star in the East is so associated with such warm and powerful memories of Christmas that it keeps us from seeing just how ridiculous and even absurd it really is. Here's what the Scripture says, “They saw the star rising in the East and left everything to pay homage to Jesus.” Now the Bible scholars among us will say that these Wise Men were probably members of an ancient Iranian, astrological cult. It was their job to gaze up into the heavens and read the stars. But, let's think about that for a minute. Let's just say that they were members of a modern day equivalent – the Wisemen's Institute, Star-gazing Policy Think tank & Philanthropic Foundation. Having seen the Star in the East, they meet with the executive director, their boss. “Hmmm, look, we've just seen a Star in the East. Hope you don't mind. We're heading out for Jerusalem. We won't need more than six or eight months of leave time. And by the way, we'll be borrowing three of the staff camels. Or, if that isn't convincing, think about happened at home. “Hi hon, look, my buddies and I saw this star up in the sky. We'll be gone for a few months. But don't worry, the boss is letting me use the company camel. You can look after the kids.” You get the idea.

Across the broad expanse they rode, guided only by the light of a star to pay homage to Jesus – motivated by a deep, abiding, even gritty commitment to someone that had never seen him. They had only seen the sign.

That is the way it is with the signs of faith. In the popular mind seeing signs is a way of predicting the future – knowing what's going to happen next. But, that's not the way of faith. Predicting the future is the work of soothsayers and fortune tellers, futurists, and even dare we say it – business columnists and hedge fund managers. But, seeing the future is not the measure of faith. It is not the mission of the church. A year ago who could have foreseen just where we

would be today – the remarkable changes in the economy and the challenges to our sense of well-being. Following the light of that star isn't foretelling the future, it is looking at what's happening right now, today and seeing the living presence of Christ – God's hand, God's living Spirit hovering over the waters, moving in the world today

This you will never hear about on CNN, or read it the newspapers, or God forbid, looking at monthly financial statements. How distracting – even frightening this can be. How great the temptation to panic, become fearful, self-absorbed, self-centered, even self-righteous. But, they, the Wise Ones saw the star rising in the east and they traveled great distances to offer their gifts to Christ.

Now is the time to tell the story, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love. We have been here a long time and we have come a long way bringing precious and sacred gifts so needed in such a time as this. And these are the three gifts that we have brought.

The first is and the most important is generosity. There is no more beautiful or powerful note of Christian character. Generosity opens the doors of possibility. Generosity makes things happen. Uncertain economic times make us realize how precious generosity can be. When all is going well and everyone is feeling flush, generosity seems easy to muster. That is not true when expectations are falling and the future seems unclear.

It has been more than a generation since we have seen the kind of uncertainty we have all experienced. As we considered how generous we could be in supporting our churches and their worthwhile ministries, the response from around Delaware has been deeply impressive. Thank you. Your gifts take on added meaning and power when considered in the context of these days. You need to know of respect and appreciation for every sacrifice and generous gift offered in the Name of Christ.

Compassion is the second great gift. Compassion always asks us to look outside of ourselves. Compassion bids us to lay aside our fears and preempt our past judgments. Compassion is having a heart for others. Compassion is taking responsibility for building and serving the common good for everyone. Over these last months Delawareans have been responding to that call. And, they have been responding generously.

In the early fall, newspapers reported that food banks were running out of food. Utility bills were going unpaid. The lines at shelters were growing longer. In response churches and church members across our state took up collections and organized food drives. It is amazing and humbling to learn about all that has been done. This is a ministry of compassion. It lies near to the heart of Jesus. "Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Stewardship is the third great gift. Stewardship begins with the simplest of prayers. "O God, help me to use faithfully the gifts I have been given." The Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Delaware is committed to this kind of thoughtful, prayerful use of our resources and expenditures. Over the last months our Finance Committee, Trustees, and staff have been guided by this spirit. The current environment asks us to be good stewards – carefully assessing needs and making good decisions to shepherd the resources given for our use.

The faithfulness, generosity, and good spirit of Episcopalians in Delaware are unchanged. Every Sunday the Holy Word is read, the sacred bread is broken and the cup shared. Children are cared for and taught. The sick are visited and human needs met. All are welcome here.

Now as we gathered in our diocesan convention just a year ago, this nation was still in the midst of what at that time seemed like the “world without end” election campaign. At that time the Democratic Party had yet to nominate a candidate. The General Election was still months away. But, only a few days before our convention one candidate came to Philadelphia – the birthplace of freedom. He was there to deliver a speech on racism. His words have direct bearing on the work of our convention today. Barack Obama spoke about our nation’s original sin of slavery and the contrast to our national promise of liberty, justice, and equal citizenship under the law. Speaking of emancipation, Barack Obama said, “words on parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage . . . What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part – through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk – to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of our time.”

Today we will not recite our long history of racial injustice – of segregated schools, legalized discrimination, lack of economic opportunity. We do not need to repeat that history today – but we do need to do something about it today. We need to realize, as Barrack Obama said that “my dreams do not need to come at the expense of your dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black, brown, and white children will ultimately help all Americans prosper.”

What kind of country do we want this to be? Do we want to live in a country where someone who loses a job also loses their health insurance? Is that what we want? Do we want a system where kids coming out of college are so burdened with debt that they may never establish themselves in life? Is this what we want? Do we want to deny basic rights and protections to citizens of our own state just because of their orientation? Is this what we want?

Now is the time to look up, to look ahead – not at the gathering clouds that may cause us to become fearful, or to lose our way – but toward the light, the clear guiding light of that star, the Star in the East. And, there to abide with our merciful Savior who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

This is day that the Lord has made. Bright is the light that shines upon our path. Already the field is ripe for the harvest. God has given us one, more, good year. Let us use it well. Amen