

To Follow a Star

Christmas Eve Candlelight Sermon

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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I am not sure I would call it my favorite Christmas, in fact I am sure I wouldn't, but the Christmas I spent in Tokyo Japan is one that I will never forget. I lived in Tokyo for a school year, and moved there in early December. My family, excited about my new adventure, but also knowing that I would miss the holiday, gave me my Christmas presents early. Mostly in the form of money for the trip. So I knew that it was going to be a new and different experience for me.

I studied mostly with an American teacher who was UU. When Christmas Eve came, he suggested that we attend the United Church of Christ church in downtown Tokyo. They held a candle lighting service very similar to the one we are doing tonight. But because they were lighting candles, they had to be very strict about the number of people who were allowed to attend. Apparently every American in the city of Tokyo had the same great idea that my teacher did, because there was no way we were getting into that church. There was a line going out of the

place, and one of the greeters was literally turning people away at the door. That is probably the first time I have ever seen that in a church—it was as if we were trying to get into some exclusive night club.

I think the draw for everyone was just to have a little connection to something familiar, something that reminded them of home, at a time when all of us Americans in Tokyo were thinking about home. Oh, its not that Christmas is not celebrated in Japan—it is as a matter of fact. There are lights on the trees down town. I don't remember Christmas Carols, but there was certainly a festive mood brewing. New Year's Day is actually their biggest holiday of the year, but there are small commemorations of Christmas. It is traditional to give and eat cake at Christmas in Japan. I learned when I went there, that it is the busiest day of the year for Tokyo Disneyland. For the most part though, that is it. I remember I went to the bank on Christmas day; just because I could go to a bank on Christmas Day! It was weird because it was so normal. No one gave me any cake, so it was pretty much like any other day, yet I knew somehow, it wasn't for me.

I had a friend in seminary who lived in Japan for four years teaching English and married a Japanese woman. He told me about one of his favorite “lost in translation” moments around spending Christmas in Japan. He was walking by a store, one of those big department stores with a large display window. In it there was a life sized Santa Clause dressed in red and white, as we are accustomed to seeing him. Only this

Santa Clause was stretched out on a full sized cross. The crucified Santa! It is a Christian holiday, and they figured Santa must work in there somehow, so one could see the confusion.

On the other hand, we see in the story of the Emperor's Tea that it is possible to untangle some of the confusion. I like this story for many reasons. Most of the Americans in the first part of the story see Christmas as an opportunity to get something. They are focused on the gift, and taking parts of that gift. Indeed, there is supposedly only one present, but it turns into multiple presents with the various layers. There is a certain, "give that to me" attitude present at that Christmas party. However all of the Japanese people in the second half of the story see this gift of the Emperor's Tea as an opportunity to give. Impressed with whom was receiving the present, as well as who was giving it, each person who touched the present added to it. They built another layer on so that it would be extra special. Only the professor, the actual recipient of the gift of the Emperor's Tea, meet their generosity in kind. It is ironic that people in the culture that does not really celebrate Christmas practiced the spirit of the season better, and with a more generous heart, than the people who had grown up with the holiday. One group saw Christmas as a holiday about giving, the other saw it as an opportunity to receive.

Our ancient readings for this evening are no doubt quite familiar to you. The gospels tell the story of the first Christmas gifts. Notice that

the story is all about the giving of those gifts. We never see what the reaction of Joseph and Mary was upon unwrapping the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. If you think about it, these are not great gifts. Gold is alright. Frankincense is a perfume, but myrrh is an aromatic resin used in the embalming process! A truly wise man would have kept the gift receipt.

These are not stories about receiving, they are stories about giving. To follow a star takes an act of faith, and when you get to where that star leads you, you can't help but be grateful. I have found that as the Christmases roll by for me, I get more excited about the presents I give people than I do about the ones that I am getting. Perhaps this is because I have the capability now, but also there is something to that old yarn that it is better to give than it is to receive. These wise men were wise for a reason.

A couple of years ago I went in with my parents on a new video game system for my brother. He had just become a parent, and I knew that he would not splurge on himself in this way. But he deserved it. My brother had been someone who had trouble finding his place in life, and he finally did when his daughter was born. So I talked to my Mom and Dad about getting him something that would just blow him away; something he would never expect. Sadly I was in Omaha at the time, but I made sure my Dad video taped my brother's reaction. I got the tape some time early in the new year, and I remember just rewinding it

over and over to the point when my brother opened this box and you saw this look of surprise on his face! I would be hard pressed to tell you what I got for Christmas that year, but I know exactly what I gave that year.

Of course I feel this even more now with my son, and I see it with parents. We want to give our kids the Christmas of their dreams. And then next year top it. So it becomes a sort of one-upmanship with oneself year after year. I know; I gave into this feeling this year. I share this in the spirit of confession more than exhortation. This is the first year that my son Thomas really knows what is going on. Last Christmas he was sick and literally took a nap in the middle of unwrapping his presents!

This however my family and I are expecting a new baby, and Sophia Lyon Fahs' words are particularly poignant. Each night a child is born is a miracle. Yes we give gifts in commemoration of the Magi, but the Shepards got a gift too. They were told of a child who had been born. For Christians, Christmas itself is the ultimate gift; the savior of humanity becoming human. But Sophia Fahs takes things down to a more human level. Every baby born is a miracle, a gift worthy of celebration. Every night a child is born is a holy night. A new baby is a miracle to their mother and father. Regardless of what that child does, the love that is there in the beginning is real. Christmas is rightly, the celebration of that love. Imagine everyone you know, your

grandparents, your friends, your worst enemy, the strangers at the department store. Picture them all in your mind as a newborn baby. Very likely someone at some time regarded this little baby as a precious miracle. The day they were born was a holy day; it was Christmas morning even if it was the middle of the summer. I bet everyone in our life, from the President of the United States to our closest friends and spouse, to the homeless person that appears forgotten and unloved in adulthood, were all seen as miracles whose birth was foretold by a star. All of us are gifts; far more precious than gold, frankincense, myrrh or even the Emperor's Tea. All of us are worthy of being spoiled on Christmas morning.

In closing this evening, I want to share with you something I received this last fall. It isn't a gift exactly since I did buy it, but it felt like a gift when I found it on the book table at the Fall Festival last month. It is the 1966 Christmas Eve Candlelight Service Message from Rev. Robert M. Doss. I thought part of it would make a nice ribbon for tonight's sermon:

“O, Great White Night Before Christmas, blowing across the wind,
and drifting through the land,

Night before Christmas hovering across an ocean of earth turning
time: If one could turn this earth around and back it through the

centuries of this season would he erase its meaning—time laden, wax-dripping celebration that it is?

With might of mind he might, but I would wager a child to catch him half-way between intellect and yearning to light the candled tree.

We lose a fact and gain the truth by giving in this once and tying all the strings of beaded Christmases around the tree and people of the pine in fantasy of silent nights.

Then Natural child lives through centuries from the manger myth to resilient reality and leave me quaking full of this season's boisterous and fragile loveliness."