

A message preached by Rev. Dr. Kenneth R. Downes at Trinity Church
Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, on January 8, 2023, Epiphany.

“Following Stars”

Matthew 2:1-12

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are? Up above the world so high. Like a diamond in the sky. Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are?” It is amazing how many poems, songs, and stories have been written about stars. *“Star light, star bright. First star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.”*

Throughout history, stars have been understood practically and symbolically. Before the compass, stars were the guiding light for mariners as they crossed oceans. Stars were also the basis for calendars and the counting of the seasons. In this regard they served a practical purpose, but they have always been understood to be other-worldly. In ancient and modern times, stars belonged to the heavens rather than to the earth. Stars will always be a symbol of mystery.

One of my favorite songs about stars is in the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*, which I will sing for you shortly with Keith’s help. First, some context for those of you who do not know the storyline:

In this song, Inspector Javert, who is your classic law and order type, has been chasing a fugitive named Valjean. It has been a long ordeal that has stretched into years. One night, exhausted and weary, Inspector Javert looks into the heavens and finds solace in the permanence of the stars. All around him the world is changing faster than he can emotionally comprehend, and on top of that, this supposed criminal that he is chasing is bending his perfectly constructed world of rights and wrongs. Thus, he takes comfort in the stars and a world view with no ambiguity. He sings words that speak of a form of belief that emphasizes requirements and rewards. He sings,

“Stars, in your multitudes, scarce to be counted, filling the darkness, with order and light. You are the sentinels, silent and sure, keeping watch in the night. You know your place in the skies. You hold your course and your aim. And each in your season returns and is always the same.”

For Javert, stars were a symbol of the permanence and unchanging nature of the universe.

Let’s hear this song now, and then we’ll have another conversation about how stars, ironically, rather than permanence, can also be the *mysterious herald of change*, the opposite of how Javert sees them....(sing “Stars”)

As I said before, Javert’s unchanging and rigid view of stars is not the whole story...stars are even more frequently the mysterious herald of change in ancient and modern texts. When stars appear, something new, novel, or wondrous is about to take place. This was the case with the wise men who saw the star rise in the Eastern sky and came to Bethlehem.

Today, the nations of the world spend billions of dollars on telescopes that can peer further and further into space. The new James Webb space telescope that just came online cost roughly 10

Billion dollars. To scientists, stars represent the key to unlocking the secrets of history, the very beginnings of our universe. To astrologers, stars represent the key to unlocking the secrets of tomorrow. Most newspapers have a horoscope section to warn you if you are going to be having a bad star day. Whatever the case, it is clear that in our corporate psyche, stars are a powerful force to be reckoned with—not ignored.

This morning, I want to speak with you about stars as a metaphor for future hope. These past few months and years have been extraordinarily difficult for all of us. I have had many experiences that have confirmed within my heart, the importance of having stars to follow—in the sense that without hopes, dreams, and visions our spirits wither. I believe that when we are denied the ability to wish upon a star—when we cannot even begin a new adventure because fear is too great, than we have lost our ability to truly live.

Some years ago I read an article by one of my seminary colleagues who was a pastor at a church in Mattapan. He was the chairperson of a taskforce trying to reclaim the streets of that urban town by developing relationships with gang members, drug dealers, pimps, and prostitutes and offering them alternatives to their current lives. In that article he used the metaphor of a *jungle* to describe the distorted values, the violent culture of the streets, and an economy driven by self-interest. So many of the people he was trying to help were, “...caught in the trap of the NOW—caught against an unforgiving past, and no future.” What caught my attention was my friend’s metaphor of the “jungle.” By definition, a jungle is a place that has no stars because the canopy is so dense that you can never see above. It is a dark and dangerous place where it is easy to become lost, and, to lose hope because you cannot see your way out.

I think often about people who are living in war zones, where they worry for their safety every waking and sleeping hour. Whether it is Ukraine, Somalia, Honduras, or just any of the impoverished and dangerous cities here in the United States, of which there are too many. When you listen to interviews with people from these places, or speak to them personally as I have, there is just so much fear and worry and anxiety. The cycle of fear and hopelessness becomes entrenched in the psyche of generations if there is not some shining star of peace to break that cycle. My point is that without hope—without vision—people perish or inflict their pain on others. In the therapeutic world of *trauma-informed care*, one of the key axioms is that “hurt people, hurt people.” When life is so fearfully in the moment, you cannot see the stars, and the result are people who feel trapped in an unforgiving past and no future.

Yet, there is one further complication to OUR problem of becoming star-gazers and star-followers. Our society generally discourages people from doing so. Even as individualistic as we say our western culture is, the pressures to conform are greater. In elementary school we do not encourage children to be “dreamers.” And, as we get older, we would consider “magi” types to be odd or delusional—homeless people with mental illness. How can people dream great dreams and follow bright stars if they are afraid to step out of line? There’s a reason we don’t have lots of poets, futurists, theologians, composers, monks, and philosophers. *We may say* that we admire some of these folks for their navel-gazing abilities and occasionally the insights they bring, but if we are really honest, most of us do not view what they do as real work. There is something profoundly inefficient and time-wasting about sitting around and watching stars—right? for what?

Have you ever had the experience of being so excited about something that you just couldn't wait to tell them? Have you every felt like you would burst if you couldn't tell someone? I can remember some years ago, long before cell phones were common, when I had a brainstorm on a long car trip. Even though it was after nine o'clock at night when we got home, I couldn't wait until the morning to call up some friends and tell them about this plan that I had dreamed up. I called them on the phone and said, "I've got to come over and tell you about this thing that I've been thinking about!" Silence...quiet pause at the other end of the phone. "Ok, sure, we'll stay up. Come on over."

I believe that the Magi in our Gospel story felt as I did that night when I was so excited. I believe that they were driven by a passion that was more powerful than the forces of conformity. I am sure that many people in their day must have looked on these star gazers with the same incredulous looks as the people of Noah's day as he built the ark. Yet, as bizarre as their vision seemed to others, it was a dream that gave meaning and hope to their lives and ultimately to many of ours.

One of the artists who helped carve the four presidents into the side of Mount Rushmore was a man named Korshock Zowakowski. He died about twenty years ago and there were a number of magazine and documentary stories about his life. He devoted most of the second half of his life, and that of his family, to carving the image of Chief Crazy Horse into the top of a mountain in South Dakota. He so admired this Chief that he established a visitor's center in order to raise funding for his blasting and stone cutting. Over the past 30 years, two of his children have lost their lives on the mountain in pursuit of this dream.

I haven't worked at too many churches that had the patience to deal with people like Korshock. I mean, people like him really are a little bit nuts. There are lots of folk like him that are so unique and so gifted and odd, that we have a hard time finding places where they can fit in. And yet, the irony is that we need people like him to help us see the stars and to help us reach for them. Without visionaries to challenge us to do something uncommon—to challenge us to reach for something exceptional, we never will.

Trinity Church is facing changes as you enter this New Year. Congregations of all denominations are facing challenging times to maintain core programs and to find qualified leadership. Cultural and societal pressures abound. In that context, I want to conclude by encouraging all of you to reach for the stars in both your personal lives and here at this church. When I look back at successful congregations that I served, there is one common characteristic that all of them shared and to which I attribute much of their success. All of those churches had a handful of visionaries who were not afraid to speak up and set a big vision before the congregation. They would stand up and say something like, "I think this church should start praying about how we can install air conditioning so that people will come during the summer." And people would laugh. But five years later, it happened. Another person stood up and said, "I think this church should take the lead in starting our own Habitat for Humanity project, including finding the land right here in our town to build that house." More doubt, more incredulous expressions. Six years after the first meeting took place, that congregation had a home completed. In the process, they brought together two dozen churches to make it a reality.

Despite the fact that many of conversations in congregations right now have to do with how they can make do with less, or ways they can conserve personal energies, I think that it is critical that Trinity Church not stop dreaming great dreams. Even small churches can do mighty things when they are following their passions and listening to their hearts. And there are people here, in this

place, who have the ability to see wondrous stars. There are people of faith and vision here that you need to encourage, not dis-courage, —to enable them to help lead you on your journey to something new. In this New Year, listen with open ears and see with clear eyes, in the hope that modern magi have come to lead you to Bethlehem...to lead you to the manger where the star has come to rest. To the place that represents your deepest hopes and wildest dreams. Amen.