

2 Christmas, Year B 2021
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
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The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Jeremiah 31:7-14 Psalm 84 Ephesians 1:3-6, 1-19a Matthew 2:1-12

With the story of La Befana

High in the hills above the old town of Bethlehem in the land of Judah there stood a little white house. An old woman lived there, all on her own, except for a cat and a dog, some ewes and some hens. Befana was her name and from under a shawl her little face, brown and wrinkled as a walnut, peered out at the world.

One night she saw a bright star rise up in the velvety blue sky and shine over Bethlehem. Befana was so busy keeping her house shining and her garden growing that she forgot about the star.

One night three tall strangers knocked on her door. "Who are you?" she asked, none too graciously. The tallest stranger answered. "We are three kings. We have followed the bright star for many days, going where it led by night and sleeping by day."

"And now the star is hidden from us and we are lost. We seek your help, kind lady," his companion added.

The third king, an old man with a long white beard, spoke gently. "It has been a long journey for us. We look for the king who is new-born in Bethlehem. We have brought gifts for him, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Can you show us the road we must travel?"

Befana did not show them the road to Bethlehem – they had not offered **her** any gifts.

Old Befana eyed them warily. Still, she offered them a place to sleep and they settled onto her small pallet, pulled up her blanket, and fell asleep immediately. Befana kept sweeping her little home. When they awoke, the strangers invited her to accompany them, but she had too much to do, too much to clean.

When she did go to sleep that evening, she tossed and turned as she dreamed of the strangers, the star, and a baby bathed in light.

"I will go to Bethlehem," she decided at last. "Tomorrow." And she fell asleep.

But next day she found that her sheep had strayed. They had to be found and brought back and the fence had to be mended. She did not go that day. "Tomorrow I will go," she said.

But next day she found that a small mouse had nibbled a hole in a blanket... so she had to sew and mend the hole. She did not go that day. "Tomorrow I will go," she said.

But the next day she found the place over the window where the spiders had been busy and she had to chase them away and roll up the webs. She did not go that day. "Tomorrow I will go," she said.

But next day the ewes had to be milked and so she did not go that day either. Each day brought with it its own task until a whole week had gone by.

However there came a day when the sun shone, when mouse and spider were still, when the sheep stayed home and the ewes were all milked. "Today I will go," she said. And she did.

Befana set off on the road with her broom in one hand and gifts tucked in her apron, looking for the light of the star and peeking into every house along the way. If it looked like a child lived there, she would leave a little gift, as she could never be quite certain which child was born the king of all kings. And this is how she spent the rest of her days, looking for that special child bathed in light.

And so we approach the festival of light, The Epiphany, upon which the wise men arrive in Bethlehem and worship the Christ child, giving him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We do not really know how many wise men there were; three is the number of their gifts. We are not sure who they were, either; likely astrologers and interpreters of dreams. Astrologers often prophesied the birth of kings, and prophetic dreams came to Jews and Gentiles alike, as we read in both testaments of the bible.

Both the star and prophetic dreams reveal God's presence in such fantastic ways that those who experience God's presence respond in actions of and in faith. Here, wise men literally and figuratively follow the light – the light of Christ. The story is powerful in part because of its imagery: kings, a long journey, and mysterious gifts. The story is powerful because two worlds are coming together in Jesus as Jesus, the light of the world, is revealed to Gentiles – pagans! Jesus appears to the ungodly and the godly.

The star becomes a bridge from ancient pagan stories and the Jewish Biblical promises of a Messiah from the “star out of Jacob” in the book of Numbers (24:17). The separate worlds of astrologic hope and prophetic hope align in the one goal of hope for the future.

The magi made a very long journey. Their path echoes Moses’ obedience to God in traveling for forty years to reach the Promised Land of Israel. The parallel pulls ancient hearers of the story into the history of God with God’s people. Oh – that’s like Moses! What would compel not just one person but three to follow a portent in the sky on such a dangerous journey so far from home? What would compel you? Like old Befana, would you have joined them?

We are living in a long journey right now. The tick of the clock from 20 to 21 did not give us a miracle. We are weary. We are not sure where we are going, but our promised land, some semblance of what used to be normal, is ahead. We are carrying the mysterious gift of hope, and it is just what the world needs. Pause for the night, sleep deeply, and start again each day, telling others our mission: to show everyone the light of Christ in the world. We are not lost. We see the light of Christ here, and are called to see that light in one another, godly and ungodly. Immanuel, God-with-us, is here. Find him. Invite others. Bathe in that light, journey toward that light, when the world seems dark.

We are called to follow the star that brings us to Jesus, and, in knowing Jesus, we change course, going home another way. That other way is by living into the deep hope of God’s kingdom breaking into our world right now. Faith means meeting God who has indeed broken the bonds of heaven and come to us. Faith is giving all of ourselves to a life that will continue to surprise us, to show us God in all things, to see Christ in other people. And though we fail, God does not. Jesus, the name that is a verb meaning **save**, has come. God is active, though our waiting is long.

Will we take our faith journey, or spend our lives trying to find Jesus?