A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach  
at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Height, Ohio  
on January 5, 2020

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

The Journey of the Magi by T.S. Eliot

‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow….
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away…
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Eliot’s poem goes on, but let’s pause on this verse: “The voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly.” Imagine the scenario: the wise man Gaspar rushes into the house.

He quickly gathers up some belongings and he shouts out to his wife: “I need to leave right
away. There’s a star rising in the sky…it seems to be saying that a ruler is born. I must go and see. I will be gone for quite some time, but please don’t worry - Balthazar and Melchior are coming with me – we’ll take the camels – we’ll be okay.” Perhaps, he added, “I know I can count on you to take care of everything here at home.” Surely, this journey seemed folly to the wives and families and friends of the wise men and the people they met along the way…a long, hard journey to follow a star? Talk about courage, knowing the difficult travelling conditions ahead – the cold, the lack of shelter, the dirty villages – and enduring the mockery and the contempt of family, friends and strangers. But, the wise men did set out on this journey and they followed the star and they made their way to the manger in Bethlehem, and they paid homage to the baby Jesus. They had the courage to make the journey – a courage born of assuredness, of profound peace.

The wise men knew, somehow within themselves, that what was happening in Bethlehem was so profoundly important, that they had to set aside other matters and make this journey. Jesus came into this world and changed the course of human history forever. He showed us the importance of the other versus the self; he taught us to measure success by relationships, not by possessions; he urged us to live in community not to agree on all matters, but to love in all matters. We have learned that life is so much easier when we love versus hate, when we are grateful versus bitter, when we give versus take, when we strive to understand versus be quick to judge. The wise men sensed the profundity of the moment and so embarked on an expectant journey. There was some anxiety. But, overall, there was peace, because it was the right thing to do.

I want to share with you an inspiring eulogy given by Gwendolyn Ellis for her father Sandy at his funeral this past November.
“My father was so many things to so many people; an accomplished physician, a dedicated scholar and writer, a farmer, a diplomat, a tank platoon leader, a Lego aficionado, a lover of art and music, a gifted baker, a devoted husband, a loving father and grandfather, a dear and steadfast friend.

I think one of the first things that comes to most of our minds about my dad was his seemingly infinite internal wellspring of knowledge. It never ran dry. This was a man who was hard at work on a PhD in art history while working full-time in the Emergency Department at University Hospital. This was a man who worked his way through the oeuvre of every winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature the moment the prize was awarded…. This was a man who learned Italian by reading Italian text books over and over, who read reference books from front to back, most of the time standing up so that he would remain properly alert. The sheer volume of information he had at his fingertips was impressive, yes, but moreover it was delightful, surprising, and always shared with a characteristic kindness and a twinkle we all came to treasure.

But what I want to talk about today is not what he knew, but the way in which he knew it. Because for all of his formidable knowledge, my dad was never one to shy away from a question. How much does a pound of grapefruit go for? What do you know about the pyramids? Have you ever had a horchata? And always, these questions came with a clear-eyed interest, the utmost sincerity, and no small amount of good humor. He really wanted to know.

If we were sitting at dinner and a question hadn’t been answered to his satisfaction, up he would go to consult the Encyclopedia Britannica, to bring the page to us, to share with us some fascinating thing. To be his daughter, to be his wife, his grandchild, his friend, was to be constantly swept up in the wonders the universe has to offer. To feel as though each new
question opened the door to a million other questions, and all we had to do was ignite our curiosity and step through.

So, in the spirit of my father, and in his honor, I’d like each of you to ask a question today. It can be big or small, long or short. Ask it of your friends, your loved ones, yourself. Ask it with the same gentleness, the same open-hearted curiosity we all knew so well in my father. I think he would like that.”

Gwen concluded with these words: “We can’t know everything. We can’t even come close. But in the spirit of Sandy Ellis, we can certainly keep trying. And at the end of the day, at the end of it all, may each of us be left with what is, to me, my father’s most essential, wholehearted benediction: “Wow.”

Wow. Sandy lived his life as an expectant journey, in the delight of curiosity. What if we chose to live with that expectant delight, just as the wise men chose to take that expectant journey of faith? What if we lived with a thirst for God that ignites our curiosity? What might we learn when we live open-hearted, when we seek the truths in this world, when we desire to understand how to live life – how to respect one another, to learn from each other, to enjoy one another – when we desire to always keep life in perspective – giving our energy to issues that matter, and to the smaller matters, trusting that all will be well - when we strive to see through Jesus’s eyes and to serve with Jesus’ hands and to love with Jesus’ heart? Let us take the expectant journey. At times, the travel will be difficult – life comes with hurts and disappointments. At times, we will be dismissed or even derided for our desire to grow in our faith. But, we will be granted courage, born of a profound peace. Because we will be living the life we are meant to live, on a journey to know God, to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, to meet Jesus. Let us follow the star. Amen.