

Catch a Falling Star

Once upon a time, I recall, big events called for searchlights. Around about the first of December, my family would follow those powerful lights to some muddy lot in search of Christmas trees. It was as if somebody expected Lindbergh to fly in for the event, and in fact it was kind of exciting.

Yard lights were big in those days, too. Before Christmas, we'd drive around looking for the biggest displays, which we loved, even though today they might be considered gaudy. Of course we had lights on our tree, and as the car pulled back into the driveway, that's when we admired them the most – it was as if the stars had come indoors.

Driving in wintertime was more fun then, as a child, than it is now. We adults have more trouble with the darkness.

You don't see so many lights after Christmas. Epiphany arrives, and everything has been put away – there are hardly any signs of the child who has been born. Even the gospel makes it plain that the wise men arrive late on the scene, maybe two years after the birth; they have traveled miles and miles with no sign of anything special except that one star that no one else seems to be following.

That's what it's like for us now, isn't it? – following that one small star that no one else seems to be following.

Miles and miles I've driven in winter now, empty back roads and lonely highways; and the older I get, the more I'm grateful if there's a light shining up ahead.

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I am not sure what the star at Epiphany looked like. A meteor, perhaps, a falling star – or a comet, which has often been taken as a sign. Whatever it was, it moved, and it was low enough in the sky to indicate where Jesus lay; and then at some point it stopped, which no meteor or comet ever does.

What was this star? What made it shine? Why didn't more people see it? The story is full of mysteries, perhaps some fictions, and certainly some truths.

It is true that God's light shines for us in unexpected seasons; that it guides some of us, while others do not recognize it; that it lasts just long enough to lead us to Christ. And from there, we are on our own. Well, not quite – as Jesus himself said, God does not leave us comfortless, he provides for us the Holy Spirit, and perhaps a church family – but just the same, the star goes away, and the world could look just as it did before unless the star has fallen into our hearts.

Do you remember this song?

*Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket,
never let it fade away.*

*Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket,
save it for a rainy day.*

The star stands for the mystery of his coming.

So much of Christmas has been in our grasp – literally, in our hands, our grasping hands; while the star shines above us. It's not too far; in fact, it's more accessible than any other star; yet it reminds us what is beyond us, outside our grasp, that his coming is a miracle we did not create and cannot comprehend.

What a relief, after all the shopping and wrapping and parties, to find ourselves here, reckoning with a mystery!

And if the star is a mystery, then just consider Jesus!

We might have expected to see a king, in kingly trappings – that's why we went first to Jerusalem, the capital city. How puzzling, what a mystery, to find these modest folks in Bethlehem....Inside their little apartment, the TV is blaring *Wheel of Fortune*. The dad, still wearing his tool belt, wipes his brow before shaking hands, while the mom looks up to say hey and taps a little formula on her wrist.

We have followed searchlights to this apartment expecting to find something more...spectacular...

But when we look in the crib, and the child looks back – those eyes have a light all their own. Maybe this is the light we are supposed to follow.

Tomorrow Mr. Herod is expecting us to present a quarterly report, and we know how he hates to be disappointed. Everybody knows his cutthroat business. After spending some time with this family, though, we have decided not to go back. Sure, Mr. Herod promises to pay well, but we have caught a star and put it in our pockets.

That will come in handy in the adult world when our own kids get sick, when our families go through hard times, as *the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*.

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Robert Frost, perhaps the best-loved American poet, did not have a happy home life. He and his wife lost their eldest child at a young age; the other children battled mental illness, and one son, a farmer and a poet like his father, committed suicide.

Perhaps these are reasons why Robert Frost did not publish his first book of poems until he was almost forty, and why in all his work, dignity wrestled with melancholy for the upper hand. Out of his pain came great verse in common language.

If you're at all familiar with his work, you know that much of it is about traveling – about stopping by woods on a snowy evening, about two roads which diverge in a yellow wood, and about stars, as in this lovely poem, "Choose Something Like a Star." Here a restless, modern man speaks to a mysterious, steady star:

*Say something to us we can learn by heart,
and when alone repeat. Say something!
And it says, "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat!
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade,
use language we can comprehend!
Tell us what elements you blend!
It gives us strangely little aid,
but does tell something in the end.*

If you don't like Frost's way of talking about the mystery, there's a simpler way of putting it:

*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.*

*Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket,
never let it fade away;
catch a falling star and put it in your pocket,
save it for a rainy day...*

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I know a woman who had to get from Hartford to Westport in a downpour, with traffic backed up all along the major roads. Talking to the traffic didn't improve things. Finally she realized it was futile to worry about keeping her schedule. No one else was going any faster.

Some who had tried to go faster now were in the ditches, their foolishness lit up by emergency vehicles.

As wipers slapped the windshield, she kept her eyes on taillights just ahead of her: they gave something to focus on as the rain worsened. Something else caught her eye about

that car, too. She could see it better only as traffic got slower and she edged closer: kids in the back seat were waving to her.

So she waved back. And they waved back, and kept waving all the way from Bridgeport to Westport, keeping her focused and safe. They brought her as far as she needed to go, and then as she exited, they disappeared.

“Isn’t it strange,” she says, “how often that happens on the road?”

Once we finally get to face the mystery of Christ’s arrival in our world, the mystery of the one eternal God born among us for our sakes, then we are not quite children anymore. We are set out on the course of our full adulthood.

We are all of us on a journey. In every generation, we travel through our troubles to their answer, and God offers us a guide, if we will only see it.

We haven’t arrived yet. Perhaps some of us are choosing between two paths. Others of us are stopping for awhile in the snowy deep. We have miles to go before we sleep, miles to go before we sleep.