Many years ago, about this time of year, just after the holidays, in the cold of Minnesota, a phone call came from an old high school friend whom I had not seen nor talked to for a long while. The call came from sunny southern California and after exchanging pleasantries about the differences in climate and temperature, and learning briefly what each of us was up to, the reason for the call surfaced. My old friend had been in a very serious auto accident in which someone else was killed and my friend was seriously injured. Without coming right out and saying it, what was implied was that my friend had brushed so closely with death that questions about the meaning of life were now very present. So, I listened as this friend rambled through several related subjects, and I gave a prompt here and there and asked questions when appropriate. My friend was practicing important questions, life questions, and searching, I believe, for the One with whom to live out this quest, the One whose presence reassures in times of deep uncertainty.

The Magi who came from Persia had been prompted by a change in the heavens and this event of the universe shook them up, it made them wonder and ask questions, “What does this mean? How does seeing this astronomical event impact us? How can we ever look upon the stars and night sky the same way, because from now on we will expect something different to happen. And if in the night sky, which seemed so constant, then what about on earth, what about in the midst of
everything we have come to depend upon and to trust? Can there ever be a final and definitive answer to such quests as these, both in the cosmos or upon the earth?” And so they sought in their questing for the One in whom such questing has its beginning and its end, the One who is faithful and present, the One who rules when it seems that even the grand universe is unpredictable, and the things of earth are fickle and changing.

Frederick Buechner wrote a piece from the perspective of one of the Magi, that voices this idea of the quest and the question:

"But why did we go? I could not tell you now, and I could not have told you then, not even as we were in the very process of going. Not that we had no motive, but that we had so many. Curiosity, I suppose: to be wise is to be eternally curious, and we were very wise. We wanted to see for ourselves this One before whom even the stars are said to bow down - to see perhaps if it was really true because even the wise have their doubts. And longing. Longing. Why will someone who is dying of thirst crawl miles across hot sands at simply the possibility of water? But if we longed to receive, we longed also to give. A person will labor and struggle throughout life so that in the end there is something to give the one who is beloved.
"So finally we got to the place where the star pointed us. It was at night. Very cold. There they were, the man and the woman. Between them the king. We did not stay long. We set our foolish gifts down on the straw and left.

"I will tell you two terrible things. What we saw on the face of the newborn child was his death. A fool could have seen it as well. It sat on his head like a crown this death that he would die. And we saw, as sure as the earth beneath our feet, that to stay with him would be to share that death, and that is why we left so hastily - giving only our gifts, withholding the rest.

"And now, friends, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without him is the real death; that to die with him is the only life?"

I think this is why my old friend called that cold night long ago. I was a clergy person, and my old friend had this big question about life and death – what does it mean to have almost left this life, to have been involved in what had taken another’s life, and what does it mean to be now given the remainder of life to live? It was not a star in the sky, but it might as well have been, for the effect it had, because it was the thing that awakened the quest.
At the Calvin Seminary Convocation on Worship two years ago a teacher talked about what he called “the other book of God”, and what the person meant was, the world that is all around us, because it is full of every kind of stimulus and perceived messages that awaken the questions and the quest for meaning for each person.

An personal example, once on a foggy morning, walking the dog just as dawn was breaking, something drew my attention to the cul de sac beside our house, and there, emerging from the mist was an 8 or 10 point buck, like a Hartford advertisement, right in the midst of residential north Hickory. Few things have more awakened in me an awareness of the variety of life around me, the variety of wilderness right alongside us here in the city, but also opened appreciation for the people, my neighbors, people of every kind who dwell in every kind of domicile within a few miles of my home, from mansion to a pup tent in the woods, from split level to Dodge minivan – and the questions that this forms in me about life and my place in it.

In a similar way a friend whose wife was ill and eventually moved to Hospice and following her death, he was drawn there to volunteer, to help and support others and in this has found great meaning and purpose. And a couple we know, her
mother was in nursing care and now they go every week to that place to lead games and show kindness and concern especially for those who are seldom visited. In this they have found meaning and purpose.

This is what that professor called, “the other book of God” and it is also like the star in the Magi’s sky; it is what has captured your attention, it is a sign in your heavens, a sign that may not, and probably doesn’t lead to definitive answers, but it is impetus and energy to seek on, to keep looking, to follow.

Jesus calls us to follow him, not so that we find a comfy place to settle down, but so that we have as master and teacher and companion on the journey the Spirit of Jesus, who continues to energize us and deepen us to find out what is true and worth keeping, and also what is fading and what needs reformation and perhaps even what needs to be discarded. Jesus calls us to follow him, and as we do we will discover whole and authentic life lived with and for others, in an embrace of forgiveness and second chances for us and others. Every kind of thing in this world, beautiful or difficult, marvelous or sad, may serve to awaken us and keep us on the quest, and Jesus is the one who calls us to go, to keep on the journey, continue on the way – because with his Spirit this leads onward to vitality, to life.
There once was a popular cliché – “Christ is the answer”. And yes, in a sense that is true; Jesus is the answer, not a final ‘no more questions’ kind of answer, but Jesus as the answer who keeps leading us to the questions, the questions of our lives, and the quest to pursue them. Jesus is the one who promises us faithfulness and help so that we may continue, and endure and thrive all the way in this life, and wondrously and triumphantly on into the next. Amen.