



The Epiphany of the Lord January 8, 2012 B

A Star Still Beckons Our Journey with the Magi

The following reflection is by Sr. Catherine Looker, S.S.J., D. Min., Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. The article is from the January 2010 edition of St. Anthony Messenger.

The wise travelers from the East, who brought gifts to the Christ Child, displayed great life skills anyone can emulate throughout the year.

In the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12, the story of the visit of the Magi has captured the hearts and souls of spiritual seekers throughout the ages. These three Wise Men from the East, though not specifically named in the scriptural text, have come to be known as Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior as they carry their signature gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the newborn Christ Child.

How many of us remember the delight we took as children in moving these royal travelers ever closer to the manger in our home Nativity scenes in anticipation of the Feast of the Epiphany! A wonderful family ritual for sure, yet no less compelling for us to consider how these travelers might continue to lead us ever closer to Christ throughout the year.

In particular, the Magi display significant qualities for any spiritual traveler to emulate, especially in the development of their skills and gifts:

- ◇ Keen observation
- ◇ Ability to follow directions
- ◇ Quality of presence
- ◇ Active participation
- ◇ Discernment

All five of these life skills for the spiritual journey can be considered important. The Magi exhibit mastery of each, particularly exemplified in the discernment they showed. Discernment is the capacity to sift our everyday experiences and trust when we are following the lead of God and when we are not.

Given the number of "signs" in today's world that call for our attention and commitment, we might rightfully wonder how we can actually know when we are indeed following God's lead. Even when we discern what we consider to be the right path, how do we get there? Whom do we trust? Or do we try to do it alone?

To help us come to some deepening clarity, we take a reflective look at the story of the Magi's visit and see what these wise companions might teach us about acquiring

some of the necessary traveling skills needed for our spiritual journey in today's world.

Seeing the Star

"We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." (v.2)

Jonathan sat expectantly in the darkened Church of St. Peter the Apostle, as his oldest son, Mark, led the procession of three royal travelers. Each was carrying carefully wrapped gifts representing gold, frankincense and myrrh to the starlit tableau waiting in serene stillness at the center of the sanctuary. The suspended gold-plated star above the altar twinkled as it cast its light directly on the manger scene below as the three wise travelers in royal capes of velvet and velour moved steadily toward the tableau.

Jonathan's wife, Amy, leaned over and whispered, "Mark really looks like he enjoys what he's doing, doesn't he, as he leads the procession with such dignity?" Jonathan whispered back, "Yes. Maybe all we need to do is follow the light of the star. If it were only that simple!"

Amy sat back and enjoyed the unfolding scene before her. She was remembering each step of the preparations that went into getting Mark ready to be the leading king at this special moment.

While following the star's light may indeed seem like a relatively simple task, the Magi can teach us the traveler's most basic skill of keen observation. Given the number of "lights" that glisten and call for our attention, it would be good for us to learn what we need to actually "see" before we take the next step on our faith journey.

One of the most important observations may be to see that we have been created by God with life and purpose. We need to claim the idea that God desires a personal and loving relationship with each of us. We are invited to see our lives as a woven tapestry of faith that gives testimony to our unique relationship with God.

For example, we may want to ponder: What are we really seeking in life? What gives our life meaning and purpose?

It is evident that these three wise travelers of old had been actively waiting for a significant period of time for a sign in the heavens to guide them. They were prepared to see the sign. There is a sense of activity and purpose in their seeking, and so when the time was right, they took steps to follow the light and to inquire further about where they might find and worship Jesus as the newborn king of the Jews.

For 21st century spiritual seekers, the challenge of finding God in our lives may seem less dramatic than that of the Magi, and yet no less daunting, in our quest to find God's presence in our everyday experiences.

Could we consider that a sign and star might be as simple as a phone call from a friend or colleague, a word of advice from a parent, an employment opportunity that seems to beckon even though it doesn't seem to be our dream job at the moment?

The important thing to notice is where these signs and stars lead us so that we can take the very next step in front of us with the assurance that we are not alone when we are following the lead of God whom we have come to trust.

Setting Out

"After their audience with the king they set out." (v.9)

Mary Anne, an executive who makes countless daily decisions on the corporate level, finds it more difficult than ever to take the time to attend to her own personal choices. She tends to sit on the fence for long periods of time before actually setting out to follow a path. She admits that many of life's opportunities on the personal level have passed her by because she was often too reluctant to take the necessary next steps with confidence. Often experiencing a certain paralysis of spirit, Mary Anne also finds it difficult to trust others in order to gain insight.

Perhaps our three wise travelers may offer Mary Anne just the help she needs since they indeed stepped out and followed the path to Bethlehem even as they looked for consultation on their journey that included a visit with King Herod. While we know that the Magi later realized they were not to make a return trip to Herod, they clearly explored every option at this early stage in their journey in order to gain the best access route to the Christ Child.

Likewise, how difficult it can be for us when we are relying on the guidance of others! Persons like Mary Anne often find it safer to stay undecided since they are so fearful that they might make a mistake, especially if those whom they once trusted prove later to be unworthy of such trust.

And yet, do we have faith that God will lead us and show us the way if we keep paying attention, as the Magi did, at all stages of our journey? What we are called to do, flowing from our growing skill of observation, is to notice each of the signposts on the path and follow the directions that can lead us to life and freedom by paying closer attention, pondering our next steps, praying for God's help and putting one foot in front of the other.

These steps may be helpful in moving us forward if we feel called by God to make some kind of significant life change that might involve varying degrees of struggle, confusion and uncertainty. Or perhaps it is necessary to restore trust and fidelity to a relationship that has been hurting due to betrayal or misunderstanding. Or we might be called to a conversion of heart that needs concrete steps to follow our good intentions.

Whatever the situation may be, we may be feeling invited to trust the reliable signposts on our path. That way we can take the necessary next steps that will give some momentum to our choices.

Coming to the Place Where Jesus Was

"And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was." (v.9)

Day after day, Margaret looks into the eyes of her 75-year-old husband, Zach, and wonders if he even knows that she is there anymore. His dementia seems to be getting worse, and it is increasingly difficult for her to find any tangible comfort in their 53 years of marriage. Sustained by deep love, however, she continues to care for Zach by feeding him, bathing him, dressing him and holding him with the hope that somehow he will know of her love even as she wonders how much he is really "there."

Margaret somehow recognizes in the seeming absence of Zach's responsiveness that she is exactly where she is called to be as she stays by her husband's side with great tenderness and affection. These are the signature qualities of her presence to him. What greater gift could she give him?

When Margaret finds herself growing impatient and restless, given her lagging day-to-day stamina and demanding attentiveness to her husband, she says that she continues to trust that she is indeed in the stable of her home as she lovingly cares for Zach.

Likewise, the wise travelers found the Christ Child in humble surroundings in the manger, and it is precisely there that they opened and shared their gifts in deep reverence since they had been so "overjoyed at seeing the star" (v.10). This star had led them to the house where "they saw the child with Mary his mother" (v.11).

This gift of quality of presence can, at first glance, seem to be so simple for us to understand. Yet how often might we wish that we were somewhere else? When we compare our lives with the seemingly better and more desirable situations of others, we can experience a restlessness of spirit. This can cause discontent and unhappiness since we are under the illusion that our true happiness is yet to come in some other and better place.

Perhaps what God most longs for us to know is that, when we discern that we are following God's lead in our life situation and vocation, we are exactly where God wants us to find our true happiness and abundant peace.

Offering their Gifts

"Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh." (v.11)

Dennis, a recent college graduate, asked, "What can I possibly give to God in my life? Who am I, after all, that God would want me to do anything special in my life? Often I feel as though I have nothing to give."

The three wise travelers might encourage Dennis to consider questions such as the following: How might I identify the specific gifts that God has given me to share with others? How generously might I "open my treasures" and freely give of my time and talents? What gifts do I allow others to share with me? How willingly do I receive these gifts freely shared? Where do I struggle to see my giftedness and the giftedness of others?

Dennis feels drawn to a more active participation in the lives of others as he seeks ways to open his coffers as the Magi did when they presented their treasures to Jesus.

So often spiritual seekers of all ages and ways of life think that God must want something spectacular and beyond their reach in order to prove that they have some kind of worthwhile gift to share. Can we dare to believe that God wants us to be happy in our giving from the depths of who we are?

While Dennis may not have gifts of gold, frankincense or myrrh to offer, he has gifts of generosity, intelligence and compassion that have continually nurtured his desire to major and graduate with a degree in the study of human resources. How might Dennis trust these gifts as an invitation to seek to broaden his horizons in the urban community where he is seeking employment at this time?

How are we called to share our unique gifts with others?

Returning Home

"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way." (v.12)

Frank, a 30-year-old sportswriter and self-proclaimed workaholic, admits that he needs to trust his instincts with deeper integrity when making decisions, especially since he can tend to be a people-pleaser. He often second-guesses himself even after coming to a decision. This pattern can lead him to doubt his own discernment and then follow the lead of others, even when his mind and heart are telling him otherwise.

Simply put, Frank has a hard time saying no, and he takes on too many commitments while working under the illusion that he can successfully juggle all of the balls in the air.

Perhaps Frank would benefit from the advice of the Magi who can encourage him to act in truth, discernment and integrity rather than allowing his motive of pleasing others to dominate his decision-making.

Clearly, the Magi had heard and intended to follow King Herod's earlier request: "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage" (v.8). And yet, the three wise travelers later heeded their dream exhorting them to do otherwise.

Since the Magi deemed the message in the dream to be of God, they subsequently allowed their next steps to follow this dream, even if it meant causing displeasure to

King Herod. This kind of fluidity of spirit seems essential to good discernment, especially when there are contrasting voices clamoring for our attention and choices.

In order to attain this level of discernment, it might be worthwhile to ask: How do we "return home" after our encounters with Christ, and yet allow ourselves to be forever changed by these encounters? How do we keep growing in our spiritual journeys? How do we keep learning about ourselves in ways that hold the potential to deepen God's call to holiness as we find our way each day of our lives?

As the Magi can well testify, our return trip home indeed finds us transformed beyond our imagining, since our journey to draw ever closer to Christ Jesus renders us changed for a lifetime.

Being Stars for One Another

Now we need to consider how we are called to be a "sign" and a "star" for others as they seek their way to find Christ.

May these wise companions continue to inspire the journeys of spiritual seekers of all time so the blueprint of their story of loving search can be claimed for generations to come!

Reflection

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the captives,
To rebuild nations,
To bring peace among peoples,
To make music in the heart.

-Howard Thurman

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah