

Following Your Star

If you've ever been on a Carolina beach at dusk, you may have beheld a scene like this one.

The sun has dipped below the horizon, leaving tender tints of rose to tinge a heartbreakingly blue sky. The twilight offers its colors to the Atlantic, and the sea gratefully receives and reflects them. On the dunes, sea oats sway in the softest sigh of breeze. Then, high above, the gift of the first star. It causes you to wonder if any star, ever, could have been more beautiful. It appears out of nowhere, in the western sky.

Many years ago, according to Matthew's Gospel, a star of breathtaking beauty appeared in the western sky; appeared to star-gazing scholars—magi—in a country far to the east of Israel. They observed the rising of an unfamiliar star, a never-before-seen star, a wondrous star, filling them with unparalleled excitement. In their day and time, it's believed that a new star signals the birth of a great ruler. They make

preparations and—without delay—set out in the direction of the star. In this way, the quest of the magi begins.

Since the dawn of human history, human beings have been fascinated by stars: myriad points of light in the darkness, light coming to earth across a distance greater than the mind can fathom. Stars are telling, compelling, humbling testaments to a universe vast beyond imagining.

In the stars, people see images and patterns and configurations. I used to love going outside with my dad on a clear night, because he would point out various stars and tell me about them. He knew the names of many constellations. And he showed me how to visualize the pictures they made in the night sky. Figures of people and animals—like the signs of the zodiac studied by astrologers.

Astrologers like these magi, these wise men of ancient Persia. Skilled in the occult, particularly in the secret arts of interpreting stars and planets. In that time and in our time, astrologers believe that stars have power to influence human lives and events. Do the magi come to understand that the power of stars lies not in the stars themselves but in the One

who created them? When you wish upon a star, is your wish really a prayer to the One whose fingers formed that star?

What do *you* believe about the star of Bethlehem? For centuries, people have been seeking rational explanations—such as a comet, or a meteor shower, or a conjunction of planets—for the mysterious star the magi saw. The star we wish *we* could have seen.

In his book, *The Christmas Star*, John Mosley proposes a scientific hypothesis concerning the star these wise men followed. He claims it wasn't a star at all; that when Jupiter aligned with Venus around the time of Jesus' birth, the two planets were so close that they *looked* like a single star.

But God's word tells us that it *was* a star! And even though Matthew doesn't mention God's name even once in this narrative, you and I can discern God's hand in it from beginning to end. Unseen, yet active. At work behind the scenes. Hanging a star in the heavens. Guiding. Leading.

Like the magi, you and I stand in need of being guided and led. We feel uncertain. We feel unsure. When we first begin this lifelong journey, and even when we've been on it

for a while, there are so many things we don't know. But each of us here on this New Year's Day has seen something that impels us to step out in faith toward the One we seek. And that something is, for us, a lodestar. A guiding star.

Your own star. Have you been following a star? Maybe your journey began a long time ago. Or maybe it's just beginning. The magi set out without knowing how long their journey would be. You didn't know, either, how long yours would be. Maybe you still don't. And maybe—like the magi—you didn't know where following that star would take you.

Would your star take you across a great arid desert of shifting sands? Have you thirsted for life-giving water? Have your companions been few? Have you traveled with loneliness? Have you traveled in despair of ever finding the One you seek? Have you traveled in darkness, with anxiety about what would happen along the way?

Or about what would happen as you neared your destination? Like the magi, you probably didn't know how you'd be received. Would you be considered an outsider?

In Jerusalem, the magi are outsiders. Foreigners. Gentiles. Arabs among Jews. Astrologers. Practitioners of magical arts, in a country where such things are forbidden by law. The magi are strangers in a strange land. A land that doesn't accept the One they're searching for. A land where the powers that be perceive him as a threat.

The land of Herod. Now you know about Herod the Great in Matthew's Gospel. For Herod, there's only one king of the Jews. Herod himself! He clings tightly to power. And the fear of losing that power drives everything he says and does.

As you've followed your star, have you encountered a Herod? Has there been—is there still—a Herod in *your* life? Have you crossed paths with someone who feels threatened by the One you seek? Someone who's fearful that you may come to trust and depend on this other One more than you trust and depend on him or her? Someone who's disturbed by the prospect of losing a degree of real or imagined power? Herods may have a hidden agenda and may attempt to enlist your aid in accomplishing that agenda. Wise men—and women—hear what Herod has to say, and then go on following their star.

That's what the magi do. We understand from Herod's horrific slaughter of Bethlehem's innocent little ones under two years of age, that *two years* have passed since the star first appeared. Since the birth. The magi have traveled a long and winding road to the door of this One they seek. Who do they expect to find? Are they looking for a tiny baby?

What about you? In this Christmas season, have you followed your star to Bethlehem expecting to find the One in the manger? A tiny baby? That's not an unreasonable expectation.

Or could it be that—as was the case with the magi—you're not entirely certain as to who to expect at the end of your search? A star leads the magi not to a stable, but to a house. Not to a newborn, but to a young child.

This child will grow, as children have a way of doing. He will grow into someone who may not be what we expect him to be. He doesn't always conform to our expectations.

But he is the fulfillment of all our hopes. And when you've followed your star to him, you're filled with an inexpressible joy. A joy so complete that even though you—

like the magi—probably don't know how, or *if*, you'll ever get back to the place you started from, you stop worrying about returning there. Getting back to where you once were no longer matters.

Because, as Dante affirmed centuries ago: “If thou follow thy star, thou canst not fail of a glorious haven.”

You have followed your star to this place today. You've found a haven. This isn't your final destination. You still have miles to travel. And you are weary. But you've come to the house of the very One the magi visited. Like the magi, you worship him. With a glad heart, you lay your gifts—your treasure—before him. He greets you. And he invites you to his table.

There, you'll be nourished. There, you'll be sustained. There, you'll be filled with the wonder of the Christ. There, you'll be made ready to journey with him on another road—and in this bright new year, to go and tell the great good news of this One your star has led you to.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.