

## **The Never Ending Journey**

PSALM 72:1-14, MATTHEW 2:1-12

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*(Every year on the closest Sunday to Epiphany, each member of our congregation receives a paper star with a word, such as "courage," or "hope," or "clarity," on it. The word becomes that person's spiritual focus for the year, whether it represents a trait they already possess, or an area with room for growth, or something to be given to or received from others. In some cases, it is readily apparent to the star holder what their word signifies. Others take all year to clarify its meaning and purpose. This tradition has had a powerful influence on many of us over the years.)*

Twelve days after Christmas is the traditional time when the Christian Church celebrates Epiphany, which means "Manifestation," since the light of Jesus Christ manifested itself in the darkness. But it has also been called the Feast of the Three Kings, since this is also when we celebrate the arrival of the wise men.

From childhood on, all of us have had firmly implanted in our minds the Christmas scene. We've seen it in movies and pictures, on Christmas cards, and in countless pageants. There is the lowly stall with Mary and Joseph watching over a sleeping Jesus in a manger. They are surrounded by cows and donkeys and sheep. A star shines in the sky, there are angels somewhere in the vicinity, and several humble shepherds complete with sheep come to gaze and adore. And, of course, three kings bearing gifts!

Unthinkable that they shouldn't all be crowded into that typical Christmas tableau, but the picture isn't accurate. We've compressed the story, accordion-pleated all into one glorious evening of busy confusion. But the wise men did not miraculously amble into the stable on the evening of Jesus' birth. Their arrival has been conjectured as being anywhere between 40 days to one year after the Holy Night.

There were vast distances to travel over unknown terrain. Their destination was unsure. They were at the mercy of the elements and the countries through which they traveled. This much we know – they came from afar. Their name "wise men" is a translation of the Greek word Magi, a name by which they are often known and from which have come the terms magic and magician. They were probably members of an Oriental priestly caste who were familiar with astronomy or astrology, and had been taught by dispersed Jews to expect the coming of a Savior, a universal King. Some sign in the heavens convinced them that such an event had taken place.

How long did it take them to prepare for the journey? How long to set out? To cross the great distances from different directions? A very long time probably passed before the weary travelers arrived in Jerusalem. Tradition has it that there were three kings (one old, one young, and one black) from Egypt, India and Greece, with the names of Melchior, Caspar, and Balthassar. But there is no basis of fact for any of that. In truth, we do not even know that there were three wise men. The Bible gives no number. There could have been two, or a whole caravan. We get the number three because just three explicit gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) are mentioned.

We do not know how long they remained in Jerusalem once they arrived there. What we do know, according to Matthew's Gospel, is that when they followed the star to Bethlehem, they found Mary with Jesus in a house. Yes, in a house – not a stable or barn. Perhaps the Holy Family had stayed in Bethlehem for Mary to regain her strength, or perhaps they had returned to Nazareth after the birth, but had journeyed back to Bethlehem a year later for the Passover.

Regardless of the question of these facts, all Christians who hear this story instinctively recognize its value, importance and meaning: the triumph of goodness over evil; the call of God upon diverse lives, bringing them from far away and by many ways to worship the Christ; and the sense of awe and wonder, thanksgiving and worship that surrounds the birth of this child.

And I'm thinking too that our false perception of the Magi's miraculous appearance on the eve of Christ's birth completely negates the arduousness and peril, the cost of sacrifice of the wise men's journey. This was no quickie trip to the mall. To outfit a caravan cost a fortune. There were provisions to secure. Family and friends were left behind, traded for a distant journey across the wilderness on the strength of a sign! There was no star to follow. They didn't see a star again until they journeyed to Bethlehem from Jerusalem. They followed their heart's call over the desert.

I'm reminded of a wonderful story of a missionary woman who taught in a mission school. One of her favorite students was a young boy. At Christmas time he presented her with a beautiful, perfectly shaped seashell. She knew there was only one beach where he could have obtained this shell, but that was over 30 miles away and the boy had no means of traveling that far. When she asked him about it, he admitted that he had walked the 30 miles there and the 30 miles back in order to obtain the shell. She was aghast. "But that's so far," she said. "Why ever did you do it?" He answered gently, "Long walk part of gift."

So, too, I think, for the Magi all the long distance and all that long time for one purpose – *worship*. Not to serve Him, not to seek favor from Him or to rule in power with Him, but to worship and adore.

I am struck by the startling comparison the wise men's journey has with our own spiritual journey. So many people never realize the cost and commitment the Magi undertook. They mistake the Christian walk as being easy and quickly attained, without incident, or snag, without dry deserts to cross, without nights so black you can't see where you're going. There seems to be this misconception that all one has to do is say you're a Christian, or come to church occasionally on Sunday and – ALLAKAZAAM! – one can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel with bare hands and leap tall buildings with a single bound, landing squarely, smartly, neatly, at the side of the manger, bathed in the glory of the presence of God.

But while those people are trying to take the leaping shortcuts, down below are those awestruck Magi, plodding the long trail, living out their lives on that journey. Faith and devotion is not that starburst in the sky. Faith is the vision, the eyes to see the star even when it has faded from the sky. Yet, still it burns in one's heart and leads you on.

And just as the long walk was part of the boy's gift to his missionary teacher, so too is our life's journey the gift we give to Jesus. There is a purpose in the journey itself. God gives the sign, and we may stay or we may journey. We will face hardships, both natural and humanly-created, for the journey leads to life for all who venture it. And

there will be some who, like Herod, react with hatred and hostility, who would gladly destroy this Jesus Christ who interferes with their lives. And some, like the chief priests and scribes, will react with indifference. They will pass on by Jesus, for He means nothing to them.

But there are the wise ones who will react with adoring worship, who desire out of love to lay at Jesus' feet the grandest and noblest and best gift they can bring. And I am convinced that the best and grandest gift is the gift of ourselves, our whole selves, our life's journey. Not a life lived selfishly for our own pleasure, which at the end we plop down as a paltry gift for the Christ Child. Rather each twisting and turning of our way, each valley and mountain, each joy and sorrow, each act of charity and love, care and outreach, of our whole voyage through life is the only gift that is worthy to place before this Jesus. Anything less comes from a heart that doesn't fully understand what God has done for us through the birth of His Son.

There are the famous to whom we can point and say, "See? They understood. They gave or are giving their lives as gifts." Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Florence Nightingale, John Wesley, Billy Graham. But most are not famous. Most are quiet, dedicated people who have given their lives in service as the greatest gift they could give.

Today each of you has received a special Epiphany gift. Perhaps the word on your star is not one you would have picked for yourself. Maybe you don't understand the meaning or relevance of the word at all. But in the days to come, as you meditate on it and think of ways in which it might apply to you, as you wonder on the mystery of how God intends to make use of that gift in your life, perhaps you will find your star gift helping to develop a focus of your relationship with God that lasts throughout the year. In responding to the star word, simply receive it as a pure gift. Your response to it, however, becomes in turn your gift to the Christ Child this year.

Each year at Epiphany, I am reminded again of one of my favorite stories. Written over 100 years ago by Henry Van Dyke, it is too long to read in its original version, but because it is so relevant to today's lesson, I will share a condensation. The story is called *The Other Wise Man*:

In ancient Persia there lived a certain man named Artaban. He was a tall, dark man with brilliant eyes. His robe was pure white wool thrown over a tunic of white silk, and a pointed cap rested on his flowing black hair. It was the dress of the ancient priesthood of the Magi.

One December night he told his friends, "My three friends are watching at the ancient temple in Babylon. If the promised star appears, they will wait ten days for me, and then we will set out together for Jerusalem to worship the One who shall be born King of Israel. I have sold my possessions and bought these three jewels – a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl – to carry them as a tribute to the King."

While he was speaking, he thrust his hand into the inmost fold of his girdle and drew out three great gems – one blue as a fragment of the night sky, one redder than a ray of sunrise, and one as pure as the peak of a snow mountain at twilight.

As Artaban watched the eastern sky that night, a steel-blue spark was born out of the darkness. It pulsated in the enormous vault. "It is the sign," he said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet Him." And so he rode hard and fast.

At nightfall on the tenth day, Artaban was only three hours away from the temple where he was to meet his friends. Suddenly, his horse stood stock – still before a dark object in the road. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying there moaning.

Artaban's heart leaped to his throat. How could he stay here to care for a dying stranger? What claim had this unknown fragment of human life upon his compassion or his service? The three wise men would go on without him. Should he risk the great reward of his faith for the sake of a single deed of charity?

"God of truth and purity," he prayed, "direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom which Thou only knowest." Then he dismounted and carried the man to a little mound at the foot of a palm tree. Hour after hour he labored to comfort and help the stranger. At last the man's strength returned.

To Artaban he whispered, "I have nothing to give thee in return – only this: I am a Jew, and our prophets have said that the Messiah for whom you seek will not be born in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. May the Lord bring thee in safety to that place, because thou hast had pity upon the sick."

It was now past midnight. Racing to the meeting place he found the three wise men had gone on without Artaban across the desert. Artaban covered his head in despair. "I must sell my sapphire and buy a train of camels and provisions for the journey."

He arrived in Bethlehem three days after the three wise men had departed from the Christ Child. He entered the open door of a cottage and found a young mother singing her baby to sleep. In her gently speech, she told Artaban, "Joseph of Nazareth took the Child Jesus and His mother Mary and fled secretly in the night."

Suddenly there came the noise of wild confusion in the streets of the village, and a cry: "The soldiers! The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children!" The young mother's face grew white with terror, and she clasped her child to her bosom and crouched in the darkest corner of the room.

Artaban went quickly and stood in the doorway. The soldiers came hurrying down the street with bloody hands and dripping swords. As the captain of the guard approached Artaban said in a low voice, "I am all alone in this place, and I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace." The captain stretched out his hand and took the ruby. "March on!" he cried to his men. "There is no child here."

Artaban turned to the East and prayed, "God of truth, forgive me. Two of my gifts are gone. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?" Weeping for joy, the woman said, "Because thou hast saved the life of my little one, may the Lord bless and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace."

Artaban, the other wise man, traveled from country to country, searching for the King. In all this world of anguish, though he found none to worship, he found many to help. He fed the hungry and clothed the naked and healed the sick and comforted the captive. Three and thirty years passed. Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the King, he came for the last time to Jerusalem. Excitement was flashing through the city's crowd.

"Have you not heard what has happened?" they asked Artaban. "Today they are crucifying Jesus of Nazareth, who says He is the Son of God and the King of the Jews."

Artaban's heart beat unsteadily. "I have come in time to offer my pearl in ransom for the King's life," he thought.

A group of soldiers came down the street dragging a girl. She broke suddenly from her tormentors and threw herself at Artaban's feet. "Save me," she cried. "I am to be sold as a slave. Save me!" Was this his opportunity or his last temptation? Twice, the gift he had for God had gone to serve man. He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so luminous, so radiant. He laid it in the hand of the girl. "This is thy ransom. It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the King."

While he spoke, a shuddering earthquake rocked the city, and the sky grew dark. A heavy roof tile fell and struck the old man on the temple. The girl bent over him. She heard a voice come through the twilight, like music from a distance. The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one.

Then the old man's lips began to move as if in answer: "Not so, my Lord. For when did I see Thee hungry and feed Thee? Or thirsty, and give Thee drink? When did I see Thee a stranger, and take Thee in? Or naked, and clothe Thee? When did I see Thee sick or in prison, and come unto Thee? Three-and-thirty years have I looked for Thee; but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered to Thee, my King."

He ceased, and the sweet voice came again. And again the maid heard it, very faintly and far away. But now it seemed as though she understood the words: "Verily I say unto thee, inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me."

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artaban like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain peak. One long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips. His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. Artaban had found the King.

May you, like Artaban, find your life to be a precious gift for the King.

Amen.