

What star will you follow?

There's a story I heard about the northern tourist who stopped in for refreshments at a general store somewhere in the Deep South just before Christmas. There ... next to the cash register ... he saw a crèche ... a nativity scene ... which depicted the three wise men paying homage to the Christ Child ... but instead of the traditional head coverings, they wore ... helmets ... like the ones firemen wear.

“What’s this?” the puzzled tourist asked the clerk. “Why are the three wise men wearing firemen’s helmets?”

[Sigh loudly]

“You Yankees really should read your Bible more!” she responded. “The Scriptures specifically say that they came to Bethlehem from ‘a f’ar’” ...

Seriously, it's clear that the three wise men – Gaspar, Melchior [MEL-KI-OR], and Balthazar - really did come from afar ... that is from a long distance ... to honor the Christ Child.

And what an incredible story it is!

Three wise men see a star appear in the sky ... and they load up their camels and head out to Bethlehem to find the Baby Jesus and pay Him homage.

Some nativity scenes ... like the one in that general store ... show the wise men gathered around the Baby Jesus as He lay in the manger, but that's actually not a likely scenario. After all, the star appeared in the sky upon Jesus' birth.

So how long did it really take them to get there?

They came from the East ... from the region around Persia ... or what is now Iran ... and traveled to Bethlehem via Jerusalem. It would have taken them quite some time to even prepare a caravan for such a lengthy trip. They would need camels for riding ... for carrying supplies ... and tents ... and for their treasures. And they would need men-at-arms to protect them from brigands. And, once they set out ... if they went in a straight line ... which, of course, they didn't ... the trip would be over a thousand miles ... each way!

Now, today, we could load up the van and ... putting the pedal to the metal ... we could do a thousand miles in one long day ... certainly in two ... and we just might find Mary, Joseph and the Christ child still there in the manger.

But all indications are that Gaspar and his companions took months, perhaps even a couple of years, to reach Bethlehem and the Baby Jesus.

In fact, our Gospel from Matthew even says that they saw Mary and the Baby Jesus upon “entering the house” ... a clear indication that it was some time after His birth before the magi arrived to honor him. Notice, too, that Herod ordered the killing of all male infants up to two years old. He wanted to be sure that this “rival king” was dead!

All that aside, why did the wise men do it?

The obvious answer is that they came to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah: That they shall come from the East “bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.” It certainly wasn’t for profit!

They knew ... and Herod feared ... that Jesus was destined to be “King of the Jews” ...

And St. Matthew confirms that, indeed, these wise men came from afar ... from the East ... just as Isaiah prophesied.

It's true that they came from afar ... not from a fire ... but what led these three pagan astrologers ... gentiles ... to come such a distance just to pay homage to the Baby Jesus?

Being educated, they may have even heard of the prophesy from Isaiah, but the Hebrew Scriptures certainly weren't part of their everyday lives and worship experience.

Why'd they do it? Simply put, they had an epiphany.

Epiphany. It's a strange-sounding word that means 1) a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, 2) an intuitive grasp of reality through something ... such as an event ... usually simple and striking or 3) an illuminating discovery, realization or discovery.

These men must have experienced all three of these definitions as they followed the star which signified Jesus' birth.

When they left their native land, they had no idea where the star ultimately might lead them, but they were willing to endure whatever discomforts and dangers their journey into foreign – and often hostile – territory might entail.

They had seen the light. And they would do anything to follow it.

And when Mary and Joseph greeted the three visitors, they certainly knew that the elaborately attired strangers were not fellow Jews. But they welcomed the gentiles anyway and, like proud parents everywhere, held out their child to be admired and praised.

Recognizing that they had found the one they were looking for, the men from the East presented Jesus with gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts signifying Jesus' kingship, His priesthood, and the last, His sacrificial death.

These three men followed a star because they had an epiphany, a sudden understanding of a deep truth ... that Jesus was a true king ... a king like no other ... one worth traveling thousands of miles to see and to honor.

What star ... what light ... do we follow? Do we follow the hollow and shallow idolatry of popular culture? Of fleeting stardom? Of pleasure? Or drugs? Or perhaps we idolize wealth. Or maybe we follow what the secular world tells us is "right" ... even if our hearts tell us it's wrong?

Or ... do we follow the star of the magi? A star that leads us to the light Jesus sheds on the world ... for us and for all?

Where is our journey taking us? And where are we taking others?

Those who have seen the light can ... and should ... become manifestations of the Lord to others. We are called to draw those others into the light by sharing our own epiphanies, our experiences of how God has shown forth in our lives.

God put a holy light in the sky over Bethlehem, a different sort of light in which we can see a greater reality than that which is apparent to our eyes. God's light allows us to see what is not obvious, a light that allows us to behold in wonder realities beyond those that this world offers us.

Our journey to the light may take years. And perhaps, we may find that what we seek may even set the world on fire.

The fire of the epiphany.

The fire of God's love within our hearts.

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Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12