

Follow the Star

Matthew 2:1-12

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I cannot remember a time in my life when I didn't love Jesus and want to follow God's will. I grew up in the church, and have never rebelled from it. I've never run away. But that doesn't mean my faith hasn't wavered a bit now and then. More than once growing up, I found myself in a little faith crisis. Perhaps something had happened in my life that made me doubt; perhaps I was simply struggling through the trauma that is adolescence; perhaps my growing intellect was interfering with the blind faith advocated by so many around me. But I distinctly remember on several occasions lying on the grass at camp, or on my trampoline in the back yard, and praying, asking God for a sign. "I *pretty much* believe in you already, God" I would say, hedging my bets, "but if you could maybe give me a sign, that would just help confirm things." Every time, I wanted to see a falling star. My friends saw them all the time when we were camping out, and I always missed it, no matter how hard I tried to keep my eyes open; I guess I just blink at all the wrong times.

Each time I prayed for a falling star, I eventually decided that a satellite or a far-away plane was probably good enough. Or I thought to myself, "You know, that little light I saw in my peripheral vision a few minutes ago was probably a falling star, and that counts even if I didn't see it straight on." I wanted to believe so badly, and, well, I didn't really need a star to convince me that God was real and listening to my prayers and participating in my life. I had hundreds of other signs to tell me who God was, enough that I was sure even when I doubted. But this wasn't the case for the characters in today's story.

There was a lot of drama leading up to Christmas: prophecy, journey, angels speaking in dreams, the holy family traveling to the crowded city only to birth the savior of the world in a stable. But perhaps the *most* dramatic part of the story comes later: at Epiphany, the festival at the end of the twelve days of Christmas that celebrates the manifestation of God's word made flesh, the gifts from all nations brought by the magi, the light of the world dawning in the darkness.

And we must admit that *some* of the drama has been contrived over the centuries. The Scripture tells us that wise men – magi, who might have been astrologers or even magicians – followed a star from the east and asked to find the king of the Jews so they could worship him. It does not say they were kings, nor that there were three, though they did bring three gifts. It was Longfellow who gave them the names Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar – St. Matthew did not mention those names in his account. The story has been told and re-told, with little additions here and there – by writers and artists and musicians from T. S. Eliot to William Butler Yeats to Garrison Keiller, from Botticelli and Fra Angelico to James Taylor. And in famous paintings and stories through the centuries these "three" have been imagined as being from three directions of the compass to illustrate the coming of Christ for all the world; one young, one middle-aged and one old to represent people of all generations; the song we know so well and have already heard and sung suggests that the gifts were to complement the three parts of Jesus' character: gold for the king, incense for the deity, and myrrh for the suffering redeemer. But all this has been added to the story since its debut a few thousand years ago.

At the same time that some have tried to *add* drama to the story, others have tried to explain it away. The piece that gives these theorists the most food for thought is, of course, that intriguing star. There have been debates about whether the star might have been an occurrence of Halley's Comet, which is known to have been seen around 12 BC and seemed to "hang" in one spot for a while; a supernova or hypernova from the nearby Andromeda galaxy; or the result of a conjunction of planets lining up just right. But whatever it was, it led these wise men, these gentiles, to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem, where they found the child with his mother.

And with all this drama, and all this hypothesizing, perhaps it's most helpful to focus not on the star itself, but on what it revealed – not on the magi but on their response.

Remember that the magi were unexpected visitors for Jesus. Unlike the scribes and priests in Herod's court, they had not studied the prophecies that Matthew's gospel is so careful to tell us were fulfilled in Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. They had not been waiting for a Messiah. They were highly educated people – distinctive enough to gain an audience with the king – and they knew from years of watching the skies that a new light was significant. So when they saw this star, it moved them enough to make a long, strenuous journey to a foreign land. Something told them that this star would reveal something: it wasn't worthy of worship itself, but would bring them to experience something greater than their imagining.

They went to Jerusalem, which made sense if they expected to see a king – but it was clear from the moment they met Herod that he was not what the star would reveal. They needed a little help, though, so the scribes and the priests who had studied the scriptures all their lives were called in to fill in the blanks, which told these magi to go to Bethlehem, the humble, dusty, unpretentious town about 9 miles south of Jerusalem. The priests were full of years of prophecies, yet *they* did not know to follow the star – or they would have been in Bethlehem themselves.

And so these wise, distinguished foreigners found themselves outside a little house – in Luke it's a stable, but Matthew just has Jesus in a house – and they go in and see Jesus with his mother, Mary, and they are *overwhelmed with joy*. They have found the object of their search – it wasn't the star they were after after all; the star has revealed the Christ child. The Greek text says they were "wildly happy," "exceedingly joyful," or they "rejoiced with a really, really big joy." Their joy was not in the conclusion of their long journey – though perhaps they were glad to have reached their destination; and it was not in the success of their search – though clearly they were glad to have found the object of this star; their joy was in who they found, in what the star revealed. And their very first response was to fall down and worship him. Only when they had worshipped did they open their treasure chests and offer gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These magi had no reason to worship the Christ child. They came all that way and ended up in a modest house in a dusty little town – quite a contrast from the king's throne room in Jerusalem – and they went in and saw a baby with his mom. We can probably all agree that any baby is cause for rejoicing – and Jesus quite likely was an *extraordinary* baby – but he was just a baby. And they were overwhelmed with joy. They immediately fell down before this baby and worshipped. And while they didn't stay there long – they went home by a new road – their lives had been changed forever.

God called them out – away from what they knew, into uncharted territory where they didn't even really have all the information until way down the road. They had not been prepared, but they were equipped with faith. They were not scholars or priests but they believed. And they realized, in their great wisdom, that the focus of their journey was not the star but what the star

revealed, which was God in the flesh. So what they offered was not only gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh but they offered *themselves* as they worshipped.

They wouldn't have chosen that way or that place. They wouldn't have chosen that house or that baby. But the star revealed all they needed to know, and following God's sign showed them a greater love than they had ever experienced. It changed them, just as it changes us.

The question before us today is, What will God reveal next? If we're willing to be led out of what we know, out of our routines, out of what we've always done – if we're willing to follow the stars that God is putting in our lives today, there's a good chance that we, too, will find something greater than we've ever imagined and it will change us forever. But the question is, will we follow?