

Humor columnist Dave Barry has this take on the wise men. He writes: "This is the time of year when we think back to the very first Christmas, when the Three Wise Men – Caspar, Balthazar and Herb – went to see the baby Jesus, and according to the book of Matthew, "presented unto Him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

"These are simple words, but if we analyze them carefully, we discover an important, yet often overlooked, theological fact....that there is no mention of wrapping paper.

"If there had been wrapping paper," Barry continues, "Matthew would have said so. 'And lo, the gifts were inside 60 square cubits of paper. And the paper was festooned with pictures of Frosty the Snowman. And Joseph thinketh to throw it away, but Mary saith unto him, she saith, 'Holdeth it! Verily I say unto thee, thou are not looking, yonder in thine hand is nice paper! Saveth thou it for next year!' And Joseph did roll his eyes. And the babe was more interested in the paper than the frankincense.'

"But these words do not appear in the Bible, which means that the very first Christmas gifts were NOT wrapped. This is because the people giving those gifts had 2 important characteristics: 1. They were wise. 2. They were men. And of course, the Gift Bag wouldn't be invented for 2000 years." (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Feb 2012, p. 9)

OK, first some background on this text, unique to Matthew alone. Even if Matthew had never written the other 25 chapters of his Gospel, his infancy narrative would have earned him the title 'evangelist,' because in his first 2 chapters he has communicated the essence of the good news of Jesus, God's Son and our Savior. Often called 'a Gospel in miniature,' the Matthean infancy narrative affirms: 1) The universal embrace of God's saving intent – His grace and mercy are for ALL; 2) Jesus' divine origin and messianic identity; 3) the worldwide mission of the church – we are to be truly CATHOLIC – WHOLE – for all the peoples of the world.

Far from being sweet and sentimental stories about the 'baby Jesus,' these narratives communicate a powerful message about who Jesus is – GOD – and what salvation is about – the entire world. The implications and application of this message continue to challenge our true and full understanding of our faith.

Excellent scholar that he was, the Matthean evangelist utilized a variety of motifs with which his readers were familiar in order to compose his story. For example, in traditional folktales, the presence of a rising star was thought to announce the birth of an important person. Who would be more important than the king of heaven and earth? Here, instead of relying on legends and myths to make his point, Matthew was probably referring to the story of Balaam in the Book of Numbers (24:17), where a star was said to offer witness to the greatness of a future ruler of the Israelites.

Through the centuries, scientists and scripture scholars have cooperated to find a physical explanation for the star. 17<sup>th</sup> century astronomer Johannes Kepler suggested it was as a supernova or new star. Others believe the star was actually a comet, while still others are convinced that the astral phenomenon was a result of a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Whatever it was, its theological meaning is more important than its scientific significance. For the ancients, it offered a twinkling hint at the greatness of the one born at its rising.

When they saw that star, the magi from the East traveled to Jerusalem to find the one whose birth it announced. In telling of their journey, the evangelist made an apologetic point. Although the Jews had the benefit of centuries of scriptural prophecies regarding the Messiah, many did not accept Jesus. The Gentiles, represented here by the magi, had only the witness of nature, and yet, these believed and sought out the

Christ. We need to remember that St. Augustine said that “Nature was the first Bible,” it was the first way God had communicated to humankind.

In verse 2:11, Matthew describes the magi prostrating themselves and doing homage to Jesus. These actions, along with the extravagance of their gifts, offered further attestation to Jesus’ royal role and stature. In the ancient world, one never came empty-handed before a god or a king. Because there were 3 gifts, the tradition eventually developed regarding 3 magi. Later they would also be given names and physical descriptions. But here, in the infancy narrative, the magi and their gifts signify that the vision of the first reading from Isaiah, regarding gift-bearing foreigners streaming to Jerusalem was being fulfilled. That vision presses on to further realization each time the multivarious community of believers comes together as one in the light of Christ. (adapted from Patricia Sanchez, PREACHING RESOURCES, Jan 8, 2012, p. 3)

Second, so what does this story have to do with us? It’s a story about a journey, and all of human life is a journey, whether we realize it or not. And it is a SPIRITUAL journey above all, which we are invited to undertake. And sometimes the invitation is more a compulsion than a gentle offer. Sometimes something in us just knows that we are not here to simply toil at our work. There is a mysterious pull to something bigger, more fulfilling, more meaningful. What takes us out of our workaholic stupor or haze of indifference can be any number of events, or combinations thereof. It can be a longing from childhood, or an encounter with a spiritual book, movie, or figure. Sometimes something in us is awakened when we travel and discover new rhythms, fragrances, colors, and activity that catapults us out of our usual sense of reality. Sometimes it is as simple as walking in the woods or along the shore, or hearing music so beautiful it seems inspired by God. Sometimes it is that mysterious transformation when we attend the bedside of the dying and a ‘person’ vanishes from existence, leaving behind only a sack of flesh awaiting burial. A thousand gates open to the spirit. Whether in the brilliance of the beauty or the darkness of confusion and sorrow, a force as sure as gravity brings us back to our heart. It happens to every one of us. (adapted from Jack Kornfield, AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY, p. 5)

This feast of Epiphany invites us to ask ourselves where we are going in what the poet Mary Oliver asks “with this one, wonderful life” that we have been given. Or as Frederick Buechner puts in the mouth of one of the wise men, on their way home by another way after their encounter with the babe of the manger: “And now, brothers, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without that Child is the real death, that to die with Him is the only real life?” (GOD HIDES IN PLAIN SIGHT: HOW TO SEE THE SACRED IN A CHAOTIC WORLD, Dean Nelson, p. 170)

Third, life is a long meandering road, a journey to human completion, to the point where all the possible roads in life – personal, social, emotional, spiritual – converge at the same center -- God. It’s a moment to be dearly sought after, but it is seldom arrived at without a number of twists and turns along the way. Life itself, in fact, is the process of putting all the pieces together.

The notion that we can become all that we’re meant to be, all at the same time, all instantly, all at once, without bungling along as we go, is pure fantasy. Or to put it another way, the notion that we can make great life decisions once and for all without learning as we go is pure naivete. Life is not a paint-by-numbers game. (Joan Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 85) We need a direction – heaven – a guide – Christ the Light or Star – and we need an open and humble heart to be willing to submit to a plan and purpose often far bigger than we can imagine. Certainly far more wonderful than the sham shallowness offered to us by a world whose message is buy, get, take, accumulate. We are worth more than that. And life is so much bigger than that.

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Epiphany reminds us that life is one great and endless journey. It is a puzzle and a mystery. And as people of faith, we realize that our lives are the journey and we are the mystery.

We are all on our way to somewhere, however undefined, however unconscious. Without really knowing it, we might spend our days looking for the way forward – out of the indecision, the discomfort, the unfinishedness that can so easily become the soul's permanent residence. We struggle for the way forward that is often not clear. Why? Because we can feel it within us – that Spirit-born presence given to us in baptism – it never quiets; it never sleeps. It just keeps urging us on. But to where? To God, the source and meaning of it all. It's amazing how many people in our culture are so lost and confused, but far too proud to acknowledge it. Far too proud to open their hearts to their true need and purpose – God.

The problem is that without a notion of our destination – God – without stopping long enough to figure where we will end up if we stay on the road we're on now, the purpose of life can sink into the routine of routine and little more. We simply go along, turning with the turns in the road but never plotting a course of our own. Never facing the single greatest question of life: Why was I born? Meaning, what am I meant to be? What was I made to do?

For the early Christians there was an intimate relationship between the pursuit of 'the Way,' the quest for Wisdom, the quest for God, and life-in-Christ. Jesus Himself was steeped in the ancient Jewish wisdom traditions and embodied many of the characteristic qualities of a Jewish sage. He was, as Marcus Borg and others have noted, a charismatic teacher of wisdom. But Jesus was not primarily a teacher of information – what to believe – or morals – how to behave – but He was a teacher of a way or path of transformation – becoming more like Christ. (adapted from Marcus Borg, MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME: THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE HEART OF CONTEMPORARY FAITH, p. 75) Through His parables and teachings Jesus challenged us to abandon the wide, easy path of the world and embark upon the narrow path leading to eternal life – a life centered in God and service to others. According to Jesus, to embark on this path of wisdom is to open ourselves to an ever deepening experience of God's gracious and merciful love. Today's Feast of the Epiphany gives us an answer, a model and a direction for our lives. May we be humble enough to follow it. Amen.