

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus was born in Judea during the reign of Herod. After his birth astrologers from the east arrived in Jerusalem, asking "Where is the child who is born to the king of the Jews? We observed the rising of his star and we have come to pay him homage. King Herod was greatly perturbed when he heard this and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the chief priests and lawyers of the Jewish people and put before them the question: "Where is it that the Messiah is to be born?"

"At Bethlehem in Judaea", they replied and they referred him to the prophecy which reads: *Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are far from least in the eyes of the rulers of Judah. For out of you shall come a leader to be the shepherd of my people Israel.*

Herod next called the astrologers to meet him in private and ascertained from them the time when the star had appeared. He then sent them on to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a

careful inquiry for the child. When you have found him, report to me so that I may go myself and pay him homage."

They set out at the king's bidding and the star which they had seen at its rising went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay. At the sight of the star, they were overjoyed. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother and bowed to the ground in homage to him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts--gold, frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned home another way.

THE JOURNEY

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Earlier this week, in USA TODAY's Opinion section, contributor Scott Jennings reported on his interview with forty-one-year-old Ashley Mcknight from Dawson Springs, Kentucky, one of the small rural towns hard hit by the disastrous tornado in Western Kentucky. Ashley is dealing with a

three-pronged nightmare which began in September when her father-in-law died after a month-long battle with Covid. And then on November 23, she got the call every parent dreads. Her son was home over Thanksgiving from Western Kentucky University. He went out with some of his buddies to watch a high school basketball game and was involved in a horrible car accident. He was rushed to Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville and died that evening. And then a couple of weeks ago, the tornado tore through their home and neighborhood. Ashley said that “Some days I feel like I am holding on like a hair in a biscuit.”

We have all gone through major changes in our lives, but hopefully never as dramatic as this. But life is a perilous journey and is never predictable. It is full of surprises--some of which leave us reeling wondering how we shall go on. How do you return home if there is no home there? So, while our lives twist and turn with the fickle winds of fate, our spirituality blows around as well. I would surmise that just as you could not have accurately foreseen future events, neither could you have

envisioned where you would be in your relationship to God. It changes. It should deepen. But sometimes it doesn't. We get lost and confused. How do we get home?

Today is Epiphany Sunday. It is the account of the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem to present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus. It is the conclusion of their long journey, following the light of the star which led them to the manger. The word itself means an "appearance" of something transcendent. And so, the event is an invitation for us to examine where we are in our spiritual development. Where is home to us now?

I would surmise that no two people in this room who are in the same place spiritually. Some of you are doubters. Some feel confident and reassured. Others want to grow and are searching for ways to do so while still others believe they have found the answers they need...at least for the time being. No matter where you are, the journey through life is not stagnant and keeping an eye on the star can direct toward home. We all know

for sure that life is rarely boring and moves very quickly.

Sometimes I wonder if that it is not by design. Ernest Holmes

says that, *Nature will not let us stay in any one place too long.*

She will let us stay just long enough to gather the experience

necessary to the unfolding and advancement of the soul. This

assumes that life is not linear with a beginning and an end, but

circular, meaning that our souls are eternal and that our spiritual

task here is to evolve. So, at every pit stop along the road, we

face the challenge of discovering meaning. If you accept

that--and I do--then even though we are each at different places

in our lives, one thing we all share in common is that we are

pupils in the spiritual classroom. As such, the lesson of

Epiphany is universal. We may be at different places on the

road, but the star we are following is the same.

The question, then, focuses on two sides of the same coin.

On the one hand, we are all concerned with discovering meaning

no matter where we are. The other side of that coin is how do we

arrive home by keeping God at the center of our lives? The

Australian bushmen story tellers talk about two kinds of hunger--the physical hunger and what they call the Great Hunger. That is the hunger for meaning. It is what gives our lives a sense of purpose and gives us a sense of belonging, of being at home. And how does the search to satisfy that hunger relate to keeping God at the center?

What does Epiphany teach us? It is difficult in the current state of our world, our politics and our economics to figure out how to do this. No one can escape feeling pressure from the policy and cultural wars that enflame our society. The Covid is like the Energizer Bunny—it just keeps on going and we have all been forced to adjust our lives to stay safe from its reach. Who would have thought that bowl games would be cancelled and that NFL and NBA teams were playing their schedules with hundreds sidelined by the Protocol? It's like something out of a Stephen King novel. And it keeps challenging us on the spiritual level. Do we remain hopeful? Have we become cynical? Do we have compassion for those who contract the virus while remaining

adamant about refusing to vaccinate?

How does the story of the Magi help us? Obviously, the presentation of gifts is the central focus. And that begs the question of what gifts we can offer to the world. In the midst of everything we are enduring on our journey, we are all searching for meaning. We are seeking God. We want to get home. Home isn't found in Cathedrals. Jesus was born in a barn with the musty smell of straw and the bouquet of manure. Like the Magi, we meet God in our giving. Isn't it true that no matter where we are in our journey that we can find ways to give? The people in Dawson Springs, Kentucky are helping each other out even if their homes survived. They get it. The star leads to God. The star leads us to keep a focus on God in our lives through acts of giving and compassion. And isn't that also where we will satisfy that hunger for meaning and find our home?

I would like to close with a poem that is used during Yom Kippur:

Birth is a beginning and Death a destination;

From childhood to maturity and youth to age. From innocence to awareness and ignorance to know. From foolishness to discretion and then, perhaps to wisdom. From weakness to strength or strength to weakness, and back again. From health to sickness and back, we pray, to health again. From offense to forgiveness, from loneliness to love. From joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion. From grief to understanding, from fear to faith. From defeat to defeat. Until looking backward or ahead, we see that Victory lies not at some high place along the way, But in having made the journey, stage by stage.

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