

January 7, 2018 – The Guiding Light

Matthew 2:1-12

What an incredible story – this tale of astrologers from another land following a star and travelling for weeks, possibly even months to express their respect and honour to a small child, a toddler, no more than 2 years old. What would have led them to take this journey? How did they make the decision to disrupt their lives and travel such a long distance?

And why did they stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions? Did they really think that Herod was the right person to ask? We know from the story that Herod was greatly disturbed by their question, and rightly so. He was the ruler of Jews. He had been given that designation by the Roman Emperor, so this little child was a possible threat to his reign. Were the astrologers really that naïve that they wouldn't understand this political reality?

We know that astrologers look to the stars to make decisions about their future. How do you make decisions in your life? What kind of guidance do you seek? In this world of “fake news” and “alternate truth” how do you know who to believe and what path to take? How do you know what light to follow?

We have so many decisions to make in our lives and it is often hard to know what to do or where to go. I remember when I was in the last year of my Masters of Business Administration degree and I was trying to decide what path my life should take. I had one professor who thought I should develop computer

systems for the Toronto Stock Exchange. Another prof wanted me to do a PhD in Systems Theory and a third suggested that I work with him to pursue my studies in Finance. Each professor was encouraging me to work in their field of expertise. I didn't know who to listen to and I was quite overwhelmed by all their guidance.

It was the counsellor at the school who gave me the best advice. She said, "You don't need to take any of those suggestions. You can make your own decision." She reminded me that just because someone else has chosen a particular path, it doesn't mean that I should follow it too. Omar Bradley, a United States five-star general said it this way, "Set your course by the stars, not by the lights of every passing ship."

Those first century astrologers certainly seemed to be taking his advice. There they were, travelling westward, following the guiding light of a star. So let's look a little closer at their story. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, two respected biblical scholars, wrote a book called *The First Christmas*. And in that book they explain that the original Greek manuscripts used the word "magi" to identify these travellers from the East. Magi is the plural of magus and a magus is a type of religious figure. They were people who had a wisdom that came from being in touch with another reality. Yes, they were astrologers, they studied the stars, but more accurately they were people with more than earthly wisdom (*The First Christmas*, page 183).

In the story, Herod consulted with his own chief priests and religious scholars and they told him about a prophecy in the Hebrew Scripture that said a ruler of Israel would be born in Bethlehem. So Herod sent the astrologers, the magi, to the nearby city of Bethlehem. But before they left he said, "Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report back to me – so that I may go and offer homage too."

So the magi left and followed the star. According to the story the star "went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child lay." Now this is a very strange thing for a star to do. Stars don't usually move in the sky and according to this tale, the star first leads the magi westward to Jerusalem and then turns and moves south to Bethlehem before stopping at Jesus' home. Borg and Crossan tell us that there is no way that this was a star or a comet or a conjunction of planets or any other type of astronomical phenomenon. They argue that this story of a star is actually a statement about Jesus. It is a tale of the coming of a light into the world and that it is the light of Jesus that draws the magi to its radiance (*The First Christmas*, page 182).

The light of Jesus... so what is this light? I would argue that it is the light of love, the light of wisdom, the light of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is the same light that came to the magi in a dream and warned them not to return to Herod. It is the guiding light in all our lives.

Which brings us back to our first question... how do we know which light to follow?

This week I listened to an interview with another well-known writer and spiritual leader, Sister Joan Chittister. During the interview, Sister Joan shared the following story about finding the light, she said:

There's a great monastic story about the disciples who say to someone in their midst, "I hear that you are going to see the spiritual elder."

"Yes, I am."

"What rituals does the spiritual elder teach you that are so important to you?"

The disciple says, "Well, the elder doesn't do any rituals at all."

"Well, then, what prayers does the elder teach you to say so that you have a feeling of grace and goodness?"

"The master has never given me a prayer at all."

"Well, then, what potions are you taking from the elder that give you a new spiritual strength?"

"The master has never given me any kind of potion at all."

"Well, if you're not getting prayers and you're not getting rituals and you're not getting potions, why do you go so far to sit with this spiritual elder for nothing?"

He said, "To watch the spiritual holy one light the fire."

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The star that the magi followed was the light from that holy fire. In order to answer the important questions in our lives we need to look for answers in places where the holy fire, the guiding light, has been lit. We need to find people who

know how to kindle the fire. We need to find people who can teach us how to create that light within ourselves. And we need to take the time to distill the experiences of our lives into something that can become a guiding light for ourselves and for others.

When I finally decided to take a job offer with IBM Canada I knew it was the right decision because of the peace that entered my soul once that decision had been made. The magi knew they had taken the right path because of the joy that they experienced when the star “stopped over the place where the child lay.” The guiding light is within each one of us. The light comes in many different shapes and forms, but we will know its truth by the peace and the love and the joy that it reveals.