

# The (Non) Science of Following the Star

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January 8, 2023. On this day when we celebrate Epiphany and we consider the wise people making their way to Bethlehem, Pastor Meagan preaches on finding our way.

Reading: [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

When I was in grade school, my classmates and I went to camp in northern Minnesota in January, and we were sent out on a competitive orienteering activity. We used compasses to make our way to stations where we would stamp our card to show that we had made it to that point. And then we would head to the next point. Theoretically. I took a wrong turn before we even got to the first station. Rather than backtracking, I had the brilliant idea to take a shortcut. Off the path. Through snow up to our thighs. We finally made it back to a path and found the station, but by that time I was already hoarse from screaming myself silly, using words no good Catholic girl should probably ever use. And once our feet hit the path, there was the station, just feet from where we had been the whole time. And the path it was on was the one that we should have taken to begin with, less than a hundred yards from where I decided to go rogue. We got there, but...

On this day when we celebrate Epiphany and we consider the wise people making their way to Bethlehem, perhaps on camels, and I think about finding my way, many other stories of navigating a journey come to mind.

My mom would often take different routes on different days to get to familiar places, and when we asked her why, she would say she didn't like going the same way every time. There isn't just one way to get anywhere, and thank goodness for that when roads are closed.

When I got to take a turn driving the boat when our family was on the lake, I learned that navigating a boat involves aiming the boat for a point on a distant shore, avoiding rocks, shallow areas, and other boats, and making many small adjustments as you go. No straight path from A to B on the water. In college, my family and I took a trip to Italy, and we drove from city to city around the country. My dad was the driver, and I was the navigator. At one point, I will admit, we could have been in any one of four countries, for all I knew. And I have found that my dependence on MapQuest means I still don't know nearly as much about how to get around St. Louis as I probably should after three years.

There are many ways to get where we need to go, and many ways to navigate. And our wise people, in today's gospel, used a star to guide them to their destination. But they only got started on the journey because of the many years they had spent studying the stars, and a prophecy that following that particular star would lead them to the King of the Jews. But the star didn't get them all the way there, so they stopped at King Herod's to ask for directions too — always a very good option. And with the help of another prophecy known to Herod's people, the wise people found their way to Bethlehem. And then, the wise people trusted a dream guiding them to avoid returning to Herod on their way home, just as Joseph trusted the dream that told him his path forward was to stay with Mary. And Mary and Joseph together made the decision to follow guidance from yet another dream to get to safety in Egypt.

The wise people and Mary and Joseph discovered, as we all have at different times, that finding our

way in life, and in faith, is far from being an exact science. I'm sure you all have your own stories of finding your way, or maybe not so much. It doesn't say how long the wise people had been on the road when they arrived at Bethlehem, but it was likely months or even years, altogether. Mary and Joseph were away from Nazareth far longer than they ever would have expected when they first left for Bethlehem. And yet, through all the twists and turns, and getting lost at times, all along the way they are exactly where they are supposed to be. And they all ultimately encountered the God of the universe, come to us in Jesus.

Finding our way is far from being an exact science, much as we might wish it could be that easy. Many of us, like the wise people and Mary and Joseph, have probably felt quite lost at times, wondering where God was leading, and utilizing many tools as we navigate the path.

Following God is not easy, even when a star does light our path. Herod cannot have been happy with the wise people, for defying him by refusing to tell him what they found in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph's families probably wondered what on earth they were thinking, fleeing to Egypt when returning to Nazareth was the plan. And the leaders of their community were likely angry with both of them for not adhering to the law, becoming pregnant before getting married. Those proclaiming God's promises of love and freedom and justice, yesterday and today, often experience threats to their reputation, their wellbeing, and even their lives. And yet, they continue on the journey.

The wise people had the star, the prophecies, Herod's scholars, and dreams. We have our stars — scriptures, wise mentors and companions in faith, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that tells us in unexpected moments that we, like those who have gone before us, are exactly where we're supposed to be. God is near.

The journeys of the wise people, and Mary and Joseph, and we followers of stars today, are not about following a precise path from A to B, with a need to make the exact right moves with every step lest we are lost beyond hope. After all, I did eventually find the path on my orienteering adventure, and my family and I made it home from Europe in the end.

The journey that we, and they, are on is about taking each step as it comes, following the star as best we can. And that means a lot of patience, adjusting, choosing our stars wisely, and knowing that even wrong turns will get us where we need to be — and perhaps most of all, trusting that wherever we go, no matter how lost we may feel, the God of the Universe is with us. God is with us in Christ, guiding us with every step we take. God is near, perhaps nearer than we think.

Today, as we celebrate the journey of the wise people to Bethlehem, and begin a new calendar year, I'm going to invite each of us to take a star — a piece of scripture — to guide us on our way. And I'm going to ask all of the children to come up and help me make sure everyone gets a star. So if you can start making your way up, come on up. Anyone who wants to help hand out stars. All of the kids can come up. I see a few coming. Alright. Journeying where the God of the Universe is leading us isn't easy, and it's not an exact science, but with the stars as our guide, we know we're on the right path.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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