

Follow the Star--Bring the Gift

Matthew 1:1-12

January 4, 2004

It all began with the star. Caspar saw it first, although it could have been any one of them. Caspar scanned the night sky. It looked like a velvet cloak covered with diamonds. "Look friends; there it is! Brilliant, isn't it? But it's shining and twinkling where no star should be!" "What can it mean?" asked Melchior. A new star that bright doesn't just appear for no reason. Something really important must have happened."

For the next week they plotted the star's position; they pored over their books; they thought long and hard and discussed for hours what the star must mean. Finally they came to a conclusion. The new star meant that a King had been born--a King of the Jews. But he was to be no ordinary king; he was to rule the whole world.

Balthasar was the one who voiced what they all were thinking. "This is the most important event of our lifetime, perhaps the most important event ever. I want to see this king!" "Yes," Melchior agreed, "And a king like this deserves our homage." "And," Caspar added, "we can't visit such a king without appropriate gifts."

So they spent a few days preparing for their journey and choosing their gifts. Then they began. It was quite a caravan that set out. Each rode their own camel, of course. There were other camels carrying their tents and provisions. There were camel boys and other servants. They had a hard, cold time of it, going through the desert in the dead of winter. Most of the days weren't bad, but the nights were bitterly cold. Two sandstorms sent sand into their eyes and hair and noses, and almost buried them. But when the storms were over the star still shone, and the thought of the new king kept them going.

Finally they arrived in Judea. They made their way to Jerusalem, and climbed the hill to the palace. Herod's servants could tell that they were important visitors. They ushered them into a sumptuous room and hurried to tell the king of their arrival. "This place disturbs me," said Caspar softly. "There was fear in the eyes of the servants. This does not appear to be a happy place. One would expect the home of a newborn king to be joyful."

When Herod arrived Caspar spoke, “Greetings, O favored king! I am Caspar, and my fellow travelers are Melchior and Balthasar. We have come all the way from Persia to congratulate you.”

“Well,” responded Herod, “That is extremely kind, but what have I done to deserve your congratulations?”

“Why, your new son, the new king, your highness. We saw his star and we have come to worship him.”

“My new son! A star! My son is a grown man, and I’m not sure I trust him to be my heir. His other brothers proved themselves false and I’ve, um, eliminated them. There must be some mistake!

The travelers looked at one another, puzzled. “But we are sure the star means a new king--a very special king. Tell me, highness, if such a king were to be born, where would be birth take place? What do your sacred writings say.”

Herod sent for the priests and scribes. When they arrived he explained what the wise men were seeking. “You’re supposed to know these things. Tell us where this ‘king’ is to be born.”

“In-In-In Be-Be-Bethlehem, your magnificence.” The prophet Micah says that it will be in Bethlehem, but...”

“Well, there you have it. IF such a king exists you’ll find him in Bethlehem. It’s a very short distance from here. But you’ll find no palaces there. Stay here for a few days and rest.”

“Thank you, highness. You are very kind. But it is only late afternoon, and if we are that close we’d better continue on.”

“Very well, but you must at least have something to eat. My servants prepare something.

During the meal Herod was seething, but his fear was even greater than his rage. Afterwards he paced in his chambers. “A new king? A usurper? And very likely a new cause for rebellion. I didn’t work this hard, I didn’t do away with most of my family, to be overthrown by and upstart from Bethlehem. Whatever is going on must be stopped! Well, I gave these foreigners the information they wanted.

They can just do the same for me. They can tell me how to find this ‘king’ and once I know that, my soldiers can deal with him. Here you, bring the travelers to me, privately mind. Bring them here alone.”

“Ah, there you are my friends. I know you are preparing to leave, but I’ve been thinking. I was caught off guard at first, but now I realize that this special king will deserve everyone’s homage. After you find him bring me word, so I may go and worship him myself.”

They set out again just as darkness was descending. The night chill made them gather their cloaks tighter around them. There was the star, brilliant as ever, hovering right over Bethlehem! Passing some shepherds in a field, they stopped and asked the if they’d heard anything about the birth of a king.

“Oh, yes, yes indeed! Seen him we have. Benjamin, be a good lad and go with these folks and show them the house they’ve moved the baby into. Tell Mary and Joseph ‘hello’ for us, but mind you don’t stay too long.”

Benjamin took them to a small house--not much bigger than a hut. He knocked quietly at the door and led them in. There in his mother’s lap was a baby boy. No crown, no royal clothes--but there was something about him and something about the quiet joy and peace of the room that helped them know they had found the one they were looking for. To the amazement of everyone there they came in, knelt, and offered their gifts.

Later that evening, by their campfire. Casper mused, “Have you ever seen such a contrast, friends. This King Jesus, is so small and weak, born in such a place--a stable, they say! And because he’s in that humble house, peace and joy are there. And King Herod is so powerful and rich. He’s up there in that immense palace. And because Herod is there, evil and fear are in the very atmosphere of the place. There’s no doubt, is there, which is the greater, which is destined to rule the world? We were right, friends, we read the star’s message aright.”

And that night they all had the same dream, warning them of Herod’s treachery. So they went home by another way.

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This story can teach us many lessons. I will mention only three.

1. Even though the wise men were not Jewish, not of the chosen people, they took God's message seriously. They saw the star as God's gift, they studied it, they discovered its meaning, they followed it to the Christ Child. Others surely saw the star, but ignored it. Even when the religious leaders in Jerusalem were told what the star meant and were told about the child, they didn't bother to find him. Let us be alert to the ways God speaks to us, let's respond let's follow the stars God gives us.

2. The wise men brought gifts, precious gifts to the king. Let us, too, bring him the best of what we are and what we have.

3. The wise men returned "by another way." Some say this was an indication that they had been changed, transformed by their encounter with Christ. When we come here and meet Christ at this table we are, renewed. Sometimes, if we are open to it, even transformed. Let it be so today.

Amen.