

Star Search

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"The Three Wise Men" by Michael KMIT

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, your Word is a lamp unto our feet and light to our path.
Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Star Search

Stargazing is one of the oldest human rituals. There are billions, likely trillions of solar systems, almost all around long before us. The next closest star to us after the sun is Alpha Centauri 26 million miles away. When that star dies, it will take 4.5 years for us to see that it is gone. We look to stars for direction and orientation. Navigators say that we can "**fix our position**" with no instruments, just our eyes and the stars.

Tristan Gooley, in his modern classic "*The Lost Art of Reading Nature's Signs*" describes that there's a place in the sky that's directly above every place on the planet. When you look directly above your head, you are looking at this spot. It's called "**the zenith**."

And if you happen to be standing right at the North Pole and you look directly up, you will be looking at the North Celestial Pole and you will find a star there called Polaris or The North Star. The two most important things about the North Star are that:

- ☆ One, it can be seen due North everywhere in the Northern Hemisphere.
- ☆ And two, it doesn't move.

The simplest way to find the North Star is by using the Big Dipper. And the North Star makes up the first part of the handle of the Little Dipper.

We also look into the night sky in search of spiritual guidance, signs, insight, and meaning. Looking up, we wonder:

*When did all this come into being?
When will it come to an end?
Is anyone else out there?
Why am I here?*

We look up and connect the starry dots to find meaning and encounter the divine. We simultaneously and paradoxically feel our smallness, that somehow we're a part of something much bigger than ourselves.

The fancy name for this is "**transcendence**" where we literally go beyond and climb higher. In awe and wonder, we feel grasped by a Higher Power, a deeper reality. The feeling is real, yet words cannot contain or explain it. In these moments of transcendence, our day-to-day concerns and petty fears recede, and life feels coherent, we're at peace. Our preoccupation with self melts away. Our assumptions are turned on their head. Our mental models are expanded and transformed. We see differently, have a bigger picture. We can breathe deeper, feel lighter. Everything is going to be okay.

Throughout much of human history, the east was considered the homeland of the sages, and this is where the Wise Men came from, likely Babylon. The Magi were very spiritual, trained in medicine, philosophy, science, astrology, and the interpretation of dreams. They were guided not by the North Star, but by a mysterious star that was leading them from the East westward. Guesses have been made that it might be a comet or planet or star, we don't know, but it was some heavenly body guiding them.

It is interesting that throughout literature there's a tradition that when there's an appearing of a star, it's a sign that a great man in history has been born, that the two are connected. The star was new and seemed to point towards Israel, so they gathered that some sort of king of that people was born. The star led them to Jerusalem.

The star not only helped them travel, but it led them along a spiritual quest, to honor and worship this newborn king.

"We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him."

What we can learn from the Wise Men is that they were paying attention to the signs.

They were like Moses who noticed the burning bush in the desert, that it wasn't consumed. He got curious and got a closer look, and only then, received his call to "*Let my people go.*" God also led Moses and his people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The star led the Magi forward and they followed. Like Joseph, Mary's husband, they didn't talk much but they listened, and they acted. The star led them to Jerusalem. They inquired further and they got a more specific revelation from the Scriptures and the scribes: Go to Bethlehem. It is there the king will be born.

Both Creation (the star) and God's Word (the prophet Micah) were speaking in their search. We need both God's general revelation and God's specific revelation in our spiritual search, the Book of Creation, and the Book of Scripture.

God is always speaking and we need to listen and follow.

When the Star of Fire in the wilderness sky stopped over the place where the child lay, the Magi stopped. And they *"rejoiced with exceedingly great joy"* falling down to their knees in reverence and worshiped the Christ Child.

I want to have the joy of the Wise Men in my life—joy in the journey and joy in the discovery.

Now isn't it interesting that the pagan Wise Men were the ones that went to Bethlehem, not the priests and the scribes? The insiders who knew the directions and the destination to the king stayed home. Jerusalem was only six miles to Bethlehem. They were indifferent about following Christ.

And then there was Herod the Great who was not a nice guy. He was very interested in finding Christ. But it wasn't to worship. In his nearly forty-year reign, Herod kept the peace with an iron fist. He was also a big builder, constructing the massive temple. And he would on occasion give a reprieve from his taxes because of all the building projects going on. But he had a terrible flaw, he was highly suspicious. The older he became the more paranoid he became of potential rivals. He already had killed his wife, mother-in-law, and three sons. In fact, Caesar Augustus once said of Herod that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. Herod sought Christ to alleviate any threat to his power. We read later in Matthew about his ruthless plan to eliminate Christ by seeking to kill all children two and younger. He tried and failed to use the Wise Men to help carry out his plan. But these Outsiders were very different in their search for Christ. They weren't motivated by indifference or hatred, but worship.

The Outsiders followed the star through to the very end. Their star search took them from Babylon to Bethlehem totaling some 400-500 miles or more to find and worship the king. We read that they opened their treasure chests (the Greek word is **"thesaurus"**) and presented their gifts to the newborn king. A natural part of worship is giving, offering not only something but our very selves.

The three kings not only paid attention to the starry night, but they also paid attention to their dreams at night. God was speaking through their dreams and they continued to listen, in their waking and in their sleeping. This protected them and the newborn Messiah.

What can we learn from the Wise Men this Epiphany?

Look up – Enjoy the stars. Rejoice with the Wise Men.

Hold your head up high – Don't look down. Look up.

Learn – And be led.

The Magi followed the light they had. They didn't have all the information yet, but they had clues and they stepped out in faith in the "not knowing." We too are in an extended season of not knowing. Keep following the light that God has given. We're still not there yet, but God is still lighting the darkness and leading us forward to an unseen place that awaits.



"The Event" by Glenn Bautista

Listen – The Magi only speak once, but they listened, and they followed throughout.

Practice transcendence and reverence – Your spiritual journey will take you to new places and you will learn things about yourself. It will take you out of yourself and take you to Christ. He's the one we worship. Open yourself up to encounters with the Holy.

Let down your guard – God is something so much bigger than ourselves. In Christ our hopes and dreams are fulfilled.

Be open – The Wise Men, the Magi were Gentiles, untrained in our roots of Judaism. I love how God's grace brings these fascinating characters into the story. Think of the word magic and magician. We get it from the Magi, the Wise Men. And yet God doesn't write them off. The prophet Isaiah spoke of this when he said, "*and nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*" (Isaiah 60:3)

I love how surprising God is. Magi, Samaritans, healed lepers, fisherman, shepherds, and tax collectors teach us about God. From the beginning, since his first birthday, Jesus was attracting the wrong crowd at gatherings. Don't be too quick to close off those people and the things you think are outside of God's grace, that don't fit your mold.

Be grounded in Christ – and ever learning from God's truth, wherever it may be. The Wise Men helped the Jewish priests and scribes go back to their Scriptures and see what they missed before. The Wise Men teach us to always be beginners and beware of becoming an "expert."

Stay curious and observant – Let's not get so familiar with the things of God that we don't see the signs all around.

Listen to the dreams God may be giving you – The Wise Men knew they were on to something, but they kept asking questions: "*Where is the newborn king of the Jews?*" We observed the rising of his star, and we have come to worship him.

Are you indifferent like the Scripture scholars? Why?

Does Christ perturb you—like Herod? Keep alert to the Herods out there and your own inner-Herod, too.

The wisdom of the Magi teaches us to use discretion. Come to Christ with the right motives. Be willing to go back home another way. Encounters with God and the truth change us and take us to new places we haven't been before. God can even change the way we see home. The new year is a time to get out of your rut and routines and try new routes. Keep your journey back from Bethlehem fresh. That's a journey, too. Faithfulness to God is not the same as faithfulness "to the way we've always done things."

Finally, be a living star – Point people not to yourself, but to Christ so they too might rejoice with an exceedingly great joy and fall on their knees before the Christ child. Shine the light on Christ, not yourself. The world doesn't revolve around you. At the end of the day, it wasn't about the star, it was about the Son that was born.

And like the Wise Men, when we truly worship and honor Christ, we give him our best. It was the Magi who gave the first Christmas gifts ever. They didn't come empty-handed. They came bearing gifts and worshipped this small child, offering him presents that were worthy of a great king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

It's in the giving of ourselves to God and others that we truly find ourselves. This is right where our search for meaning is found. Not in the stars, but in the Son of God.

Amen.

Sermon Art:

"The Three Wise Men" by Michael KMIT (1954)

"The Event" by Glenn Bautista (1965)

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