

# Epiphany

Sermon

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What *in the world* would have induced the Magi to embark upon the journey described in this morning's gospel lesson?

There were *countless practical* reasons not to. For one thing, the journey was a very *long* one -- from Sheba to Bethlehem was hundreds of miles. And they could hardly hop on a plane. They had rather to hop on camels -- slow moving beasts for such a distance. The journey would have taken them weeks, perhaps even months.

For another thing, the journey was a very *uncertain* one. They didn't know whether they'd find their way or even just where they were going. Moreover, there were no roads to speak of or maps. They had but a star to guide them. A star. This meant too that travel by day was out of the question. They had to make their way by darkness.

And too, the journey was fraught with perils, the first and foremost of which was the peril of nature. They were at the mercy of wild animals, and indeed the Bible documents people being mauled by lions and bitten by snakes. What's more they were traveling through dessert regions. They were at risk of dying of thirst, and again the Bible documents that this was not unheard of.

And then there was the peril of wicked men, men like King Herod. We know from the Bible as well as contemporary life that there is nothing more perilous than wicked men. Wicked men know no due process of law, no prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment or the impetuses that gave rise to such doctrines. They know only their manias and the caprice that derives from them. Look what King Herod did, for instance, to the innocents of Bethlehem. He ordered them butchered lest they grow up to threaten his crown.

And if these reasons weren't enough for the Magi not to embark upon that journey, there are plenty more. Scholars still debate among themselves exactly who these Magi were – whether they were astrologists or wise men or kings or magicians. But who ever they were, they were not outlaws or desperadoes. They were men of considerable eminence. And men of eminence go hand in hand with the status quo. The status quo has prospered them, after all. There was no profit to be had in the *risking* the status quo.

Furthermore, they were not even subjects of the King that they were seeking. Nothing of his reign, to their knowledge at least, would ever have the slightest effect upon them. Add to that the fact that the rightful subjects of the King they were seeking weren't particularly fond of foreigners. If truth be told, the rightful subjects of that King were downright xenophobic. The Magi weren't particularly wanted in those parts.

And so let us return to the original question: what *in the world* would have induced the Magi to embark upon that journey? There were *countless practical* reasons for them not to.

I have my own explanation. Could it be that somehow, someway, dimly, vaguely, the Magi perceived in that star a sign that was the beckoning of God? For God *is* a God who beckons in signs -- The manna, the quail, the blooming rod, the fleece, the still small voice, the babe wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, the sign of Jonah.... It may sound farfetched, but I can think of no other plausible explanation for the Magi to embark upon that journey.

And if this is true then it's altogether possible that God beckons *us* in signs. It could be anything -- a star, yes, or a rainbow. But too it could be a child in poverty, a stranger in need, a widow in mourning. It could be a lie we know to be a lie. It could be an act of forgiveness. It could be in some appeal we feel compelled to make to any power out there for peace on this earth. It could be anything. As with the Magi, it is ours to perceive in the

signs in our lives the beckoning of God; ours to perceive, and then ours to embark upon a journey.

Of course, again, there are countless practical reasons not to. The journey could take a long time. It could take the rest of our lives. You know how it is with these things. Way leads on to way. You get to one horizon only to see another.

It could be uncertain. We have no idea where we'll end up only the general direction we're heading. That's not the best game plan for a journey.

And of course there are perils. The journey would probably lead us through dangerous terrain. Most journeys of any distance do. And then there are today's Herods, hating the truth because it opposes them. And let's face it, it's pretty comfortable where we are right now. There are countless practical reasons for us not to, but let's return to the Magi for a moment.

There was not one practical reason for them to embark upon that journey, and not one practical reason for them, at their journey's end, to have felt as they did perfectly justified in having done so. After all, the "king," that they journeyed to behold was poor, lowly, wrapped in rags, born to a peasant girl who in other circumstance they would have taken no notice of.

Yet upon beholding that king some strange truth broke in upon them; a strange truth about the nature of the ultimate sovereignty, about the nature of ultimate power, about the nature of the ultimate existence. They could scarcely have conceived the fullness of it, yet still they felt its force fully enough to fall on their knees and pay homage to him and offer him gifts; and they felt its force fully enough to steal away in defiance of King Herod and in allegiance to Him.

No doubt they left him changed men. No doubt, too, that they had no regrets over their journey. I guess it's safe to conclude that the practical course is not always the best one.

A New Year has now dawned upon us. I wish I could say it promises to be a great year, but of course I cannot. It promises at best to be a challenging year. A challenging year for us, yes, with the on going economic crisis, but much worse for those across the world on the brink of war, those suffering the effects of terrorism, those ravaged by poverty.

But our God will send signs to beckon us, and we must be vigilant to perceive them and courageous to embark upon impractical journeys, that through us in this coming year his way of truth, his way of justice, and his way of love is accomplished through us. This is the word of God for Epiphany. Amen.

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