

The Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ
Journeys
Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

“Arise, shine, for your light has come....”

Long ago, when Herod was king and Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, there were wise men in distant lands, minding their own business. Then one night, a star appeared – so bright they couldn’t ignore it. They weren’t sure whether it burned in the sky or in their imagination, but they were wise enough to know that it didn’t matter. Something beyond themselves was calling – calling them to take a journey, to respond to a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.

The trouble with stars that beckon us is that we never know where their light will lead. The invitation can take many forms – an unexpected opportunity, a new relationship, a chance to do something different, a possibility to explore a long-held desire. Sometimes it emerges from crisis or loss. It may come through another person, or it may rise up from within – perhaps through our imagination.

We sense a call, hear an invitation, feel a tug – something that beckons us to follow a light, to begin a journey. It was so with those wise men. They set out, not knowing what the journey would mean, or where it would take them. If your experience is like mine – and like countless others – we begin with only a glimmer to guide us: a desire, a tug, a whisper. We start with a single step, then another, believing the light will somehow lead us on.

The poet W. H. Auden imagined the thoughts of the wise men in *For the Time Being – A Christmas Oratorio*:

To discover how to be truthful now
Is the reason I follow this star.

To discover how to be living now
Is the reason I follow this star.

To discover how to be loving now
Is the reason I follow this star.¹

Each followed for a different reason, but as the third wise man says:

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But we have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
is the reason we follow this star.²

We follow the prompting – whatever its form – because deep down we hope that it will lead us “to discover how to be human now” – to discover truth, life, and love.

Life itself is a journey of discovery – discovering what it means to be the person God created us to be. That requires risk, courage, and trust – to step into the unknown and follow the star.

Auden continues:

Led by the light of an unusual star,
We hunted high and low.

Have travelled far,
For many days, a little group alone
With doubts, reproaches, boredom, the unknown.

Through stifling gorges.
Over level lakes,
Tundras intense and irresponsible seas.

In vacant crowds and humming silences,
By ruined arches and past modern shops,
Counting the miles,
And the absurd mistakes.

O here and now our endless journey stops.³

The wise men risked fortunes and reputations to travel so far, only to have their purpose nearly thwarted by a paranoid ruler. They faced their doubts, endured reproaches and ridicule, and questioned the sense of their journey. And I can imagine them camped at night, staring into the fire, wondering if they had misread the star entirely. Was it all a foolish mistake?

Is that familiar? The nights when we wonder if we misheard the call? Yet, doubts and questions are not failures – they are part of the journey – part of our search. Sometimes the journey is exciting; sometimes it's tedious. Sometimes we are confident; sometimes we feel utterly lost. Sometimes there's light; sometimes only darkness.

Their star led them first to Jerusalem, to Herod's palace. They asked Herod – of all people – if he knew of any other kings. A foolish question, but it got his attention. He consulted his priests, who searched the scriptures: Bethlehem was the place. So, Herod sent them on, with instructions to report back. They had no intention of doing so. Yet notice: even Herod became an instrument of guidance. As Auden observes:

And for Thy Goodness even sin
Is valid as a sign.

On our journey nothing is wasted – not even sin, not even our worst mistakes.

A parish priest once said to his people: "Don't follow me. I don't know where I'm going. Follow Christ. He knows the way." That's the heart of our journey. It's Christ's relationship with us that matters. That's what we trust.

On the night before his death, Jesus prepared his disciples for their own journey through grief, fear, and unknowing. He said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me... I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

"I am your way," he tells us.
"I am your path and your destination.
I am in the star you follow, in the questions you ask,
in the scriptures you read,
in the sacraments you share,
in the mistakes you make,
in the people around you,
and in your dreams and hopes.
I'm there in that deep-felt desire that beckons you on. Trust in me."

So here we are – on a journey, following the light, open to a call, open to new discoveries. We're invited to take that first step, then another, into what may be unknown and risky, trusting that this journey has a purpose and that Christ journeys with us.

Auden ends his Oratorio with this chorus:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.⁴

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¹ W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, in *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 369.

² *Auden*, 370

³ *Auden*, 380-381

⁴ *Auden*, 400