

“Your Light Has Come” / Matthew 2:1-12 / Epiphany ~ 5 January 2014

Wise people came from the East, Matthew tells us. They came from afar, following a star, or something they believed to be a star, just following. We humans with our sense of wonder, our thirst for knowledge, our lust for adventure, and riches, and power! We've always been chasing after something. Whether it's the brightest light in the night sky, or the biggest, or the newest, something shining through the dark will draw us. What is history but the record of our many, many quests? Whole nations have been known to get up and relocate in search of salt, or spices, or water. You know, long before your wife made you get a GPS, all a fellow needed was a map and a compass, and he'd be off, just like those wise men! Following! Following...the stars.

Bill Bryson's book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, describes the events of the mid-1700s when all the scientists of the day decided that they wanted to figure out how far the earth is from the sun. I find it interesting that a great many of those early amateur scientists had the title “reverend” stuck onto their names. They were village parsons or professors in the divinity schools who, in between writing sermons or lectures, spent their free time fidgeting with telescopes and compasses, scribbling down numbers, weighing rocks, digging for fossils, trying to figure out how gravity worked, or how much our planet weighed.

And so it happened in 1761 that whole hordes of these curious misfits in their academic robes and their clerical collars set off from all ends of the earth—from Germany, and Sweden, and England, and France—to faraway tropical places where they meant to take measurements of this thing or that on an the exact moment when Venus passed over the face of the sun. They lugged their strange machines onto mountains and deserts, for the location had to be just so. And they had only one moment in time when they could take their readings, for Venus doesn't pass over the sun very often. It happens in pairs eight years apart, but then it will be well over 100 years before it happens again. Many of these fellows—perhaps like some of the Magi—were struck down by illness, or shipwreck, or broken equipment. Hostile natives. Jealous colleagues.

Guillaume Le Gentil was a Frenchman who gave himself a whole year to make the journey from France to the perfect spot in India in order to observe Venus's passage before the sun, and thus calculate the distance between the earth and all the other things out there in the galaxy. Most ships could have made the voyage in a year, but Le Gentil was a congenitally unlucky man, and for him a year wasn't enough. When the great day arrived, the poor scientist found himself still bobbing around at sea—the worst place to be, since it would be impossible to take steady measurements on a rocking ship. He missed missed his “window.” Undaunted, Le Gentil proceeded to India to await Venus's next passage in front of the sun, which would occur eight years later. The man had eight whole years to get ready. He set up a first rate observatory, tested and retested all his instruments, and got all things perfectly ready. On the morning of Venus's second passage, a single cloud slid over the sun...and remained there for three hours, fourteen minutes, and seven seconds, just exactly the amount of time it took for Venus's passage to end. It wouldn't happen again for about 100 years, and Le Gentil didn't have that kind of time. Wikipedia says that the misfortune drove the poor man to the brink of insanity, after which he recovered, packed up his instruments, and headed for home.

Ah, but that's not the end of the sad tale of Guillaume Le Gentil. En route for home, he came down with dysentery and had to go ashore somewhere in Africa, where he was waylaid for a whole year. Still weak, he got aboard another ship, which was nearly destroyed in a hurricane. The rest of his homeward voyage was a series of maritime hitchhiking, skipping from one ill-fated ship to the next. He finally arrived at home almost twelve years after setting off on his quest. He had achieved absolutely nothing. France was now on the brink of a revolution. In his absence, his wife had remarried; his relatives had had him declared dead, and they plundered his whole estate. I'm happy to report that Le Gentil himself remarried and lived another 21 years in peace and quiet.

The point is this: We don't always find what we're looking for when we set out to follow some star. We don't always come home happy and satisfied. But, no matter how wise we might fancy

ourselves, we're all of us bound to follow after something; we follow the lights that seem best to us. Sometimes we mistake the bright lights for the best lights. We wander after fitness trends and motivational speakers; we chase after this ideologue or that, perhaps a writer or even a TV preacher; we sign on to the philosophies of some good and worthy tribe like AA, or the Sierra Club, or Scouting. We subscribe to the views of our political and religious camps. As original as we believe ourselves to be, we all of us follow something or someone—perhaps even several. Through the dark deserts of this life, we need lights to follow, stars to guide us. Think about this question: What are your guiding lights through this life of years? What stars do you follow? They might be ever-changing, but it's sure that you, too, follow something or someone. Have they led you to places of wholeness and well-being, or to places of anger, fear, regret? In following that strange so-called star in the western sky, those wise men of old came home to a place they had always longed for, but never known. In following the right light, they came home to themselves in Christ. And so, follow! Follow that star!

Wise people came from the East, Matthew tells us. They came from afar, following a star, or something they believed to be a star, just following. There may have been whole hordes of these curious misfits, for of course, Matthew does not say that there were three of them...nor that they were kings. But don't you suppose that all good stories deserve to be embellished? I imagine some Italian artist in medieval times, when people first began to carve nativity scenes from olive wood. The poor fellow's been whittling away at these blocks of wood since August. His joints are killing him. One careless slip of the carving knife, and just like that, a wise man's turban is ruined and has to be reshaped into—hmm—a crown! There you have it; they're not just sages but kings! And you can see why any wood sculptor might want to give up after carving just three of these fellows in their flowing gowns and elaborate oriental finery. In nativity scenes, the wise men are ethnically diverse, too. One appears to be from India. One from China. And that third one with the white face and white beard, my guess is that he's an aging hippie, a tenured professor at the University of California at Berkeley, which is east of Bethlehem by some counts. The Magi are dreamers, pagan soothsayers, stargazers; these strange “wise men” are outsiders who don't belong in a kosher Jewish home. Who just ups and chases after unfamiliar lights in the night sky? Followers! One thing Matthew insists about these people is that they are “wise.” Does it sound wise to follow after strange stars? Ah, but all of us are following something.

A fellow from Pittsburgh was visiting relatives in Texas over Christmastime, and he went with his cousins to see a live nativity scene outside the local Baptist church. It was a fine production with great attention to detail: not just kids in bathrobes with towels on their heads. But he was surprised to see that the three wise men were all wearing fireman's helmets. The minister was standing by, holding a Bible in one hand and admiring the performance. And so, the man approached the pastor and said to him, “I think this is the best live nativity I've ever seen. But tell me, why are the Magi wearing fireman's helmets?” The minister was a little bit annoyed. He said, “That's the problem with America today! Half the country never reads the Bible, and I mean the northern half!” Then, softening a little, the minister said, “Of course the Magi were firemen. See, son, look here in the Book of Matthew. It says, 'And wise men came from afar.'” That story was told to me by one of you, and of course, worth embellishing.

Something there is afoot in American society that tells us we can all be the Lone Ranger. The people we admire are the ones who strike off on their own, the pioneers, the trailblazers. There's a strain of American thought that tells us to follow no one, that we are our own masters. You find it everywhere from the poetry of Walt Whitman to the “rugged individualism” of the Scotch-Irish. Among liberals, this strand of individualism says, “Challenge authority, don't go over the cliff with the lemmings.” Among more conservative people, it tends to say, “People should look out for themselves. Society has no obligation to those who don't carry their own weight.” But in reality, liberals and conservatives are both wrong if they believe there's any such thing as a pure individual. Few of us have the real energy and ingenuity to recreate the wheel. As much as we like to think of ourselves as

unique individuals, all of us are cobbled-together, made up of mixed influences from the people who've loved and led us, the books we've read, the churches we've loved. No one is an island. All of us are patchwork mixtures of old ideas and new, good ideas and bad. This light and that light have pierced the darkness of our night, and we—like those Magi—have up and followed, sometimes hitching our wagons to this star or that. No one is purely himself or herself, uninfluenced by others. Even Jesus borrowed heavily from the rabbinic traditions of his own people. We end up following someone. What star do you follow, and where might it lead you?

I love the way Matthew ends his story of the Magi. He says that after they saw the humble Christ child they, “went home by another road.” Much like poor old Le Gentil, they came home in a whole new way, a way they never expected. The poet, TS Elliot, says that after seeing that light, they were “no longer at ease” with life as they knew it. They had to change. In the light of Jesus' humility, they had to claim their own humility. In the light of his poverty, they had to claim their own poverty. In the light of his simplicity, they had to live into their own simplicity, their own kindness, their own self-giving love. It's true. We are all of us created to be something that, most of the time, we are not. We are all of us created not to attain, but to give; not to win but to surrender; not to make a name for ourselves but to make a place for the stranger. All of us will follow someone or something. When we follow after the wrong stars, is it any wonder that we end up un-at-home with ourselves? What lights do you follow through this winding maze, this sometimes dark life full of hours, and weeks, and years? Where do those stars lead you in your relationships, in your vision of life, in your inner peace? Are they taking you to any place where you'd wish to go? They should be taking you home to yourself by a different road, home to the self you always should have been. You will follow someone or something. Jesus' first and greatest command is “Follow me.” Oh, the discoveries that await us, curious misfits that we are! And so, follow! Follow that star! Amen.