

Welcome to this celebration of the twelfth day of Christmas. I hope you ladies are enjoying your partridge in a pear tree, two turtle doves, three French hens, four calling birds, and particularly your five golden rings. This, of course, is Epiphany, the day we celebrate the arrival of the three magi offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the newborn king.

You may have heard about the three six-year-old boys who were playing the wise men in their church Christmas program. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said, "Gold."

The second presented his gift and said, "Myrrh."

The third one then gave them his treasure and said, "And Frank sent this."

"And Frank sent this." Makes sense to me. What do children know about frankincense and myrrh?

Of course, as someone has noted, if it had been the Three Wise Women who came seeking the newborn king, instead of the Three Wise Men, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts. One more interesting note: Back in 1984, a French perfume creator figured out a way to combine all three of the Magi's gifts into a new fragrance. For \$525, he would sell you a 24-karat gold-plated flask containing one-third ounce of "Amouage." The perfume was a blend of frankincense and myrrh. (1) I'm certain that there are some people with more money than sense who just had to have this expensive concoction.

I wonder what kind of men the three Magi were? In the folklore of our faith, they are given names--Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In some portrayals of the men they have distinctive racial features--Melchior, European; Balthasar, African; and Caspar, Asian. They represent people from all over the world coming to seek Jesus.

The three men have been characterized as kings. Obviously they were not lowly peasants. Herod and all of Jerusalem would not have been distressed if three peasants came seeking the newborn king. Matthew writes, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." I doubt that three nobodies would have had such impact.

They have also been called Wise Men, of course. Certainly they were students of the stars. Astrologers, perhaps. They had seen a star, a star unlike any other star, and they followed it until it came to rest over the house where the young child lay.

It is a stirring drama. Magi, kings, wise men. European, African, Asian. We really don't know much about these three men, but we do know three things. They were men of action. They saw their star and they followed it. These are the people in every generation who contribute to the race's advancement, people who see stars and follow them. Benjamin Disraeli once said, "The secret of success in life is for a person to be ready for opportunity when it comes." H. Jackson Brown, Jr. put it like this: "Opportunity dances with those already on the dance floor." These three men saw their star, and without delay, they mounted their camels, and hit the road.

In 1982 a woman named Celeste Tate was shocked by how much good food supermarkets throw away. She persuaded a store manager to donate his expired items to help the less fortunate. She and David McKinley set up shop in a garage. Soon they had built the first Gleaners supermarket for the needy in Las Vegas. The name Gleaners comes from the Old Testament practice of leaving some grain in the fields after harvesting so that the poor may gather it.

Today the Las Vegas store serves about 20,000 people a month. There are now 194 stores based on the Gleaners model in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Holland and China. These not-for-profit shops receive food and other perishable goods from supermarkets and big businesses, repackage them and either give them away to the needy or sell them at dramatically reduced prices for those whose budgets are limited. The Department of Health and Human Services has called Gleaners the most outstanding food program in the United States. And it began because one woman was shocked at the waste in our supermarkets. (2)

Nothing happens in this world until someone sees a star and follows it. These three Magi were obviously men of action.

Of course, not every star is worthy of being followed. There are many people who are by nature impulsive. They may jump at any star--only to regret it later.

Some of you are old enough to recognize the name Carl Perkins. Perkins was a popular rockabilly singer from the 50s and the author of the classic song "Blue Suede Shoes" which was one of Elvis Presley's first big hits. As a guitarist, Perkins influenced many of the next generation of rock 'n' rollers, most prominently, George Harrison of the Beatles. Perkins never quite attained the fame of some of his more notorious colleagues. He once explained it like this: "I never envied Elvis his mansion and all that. All those boys--Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison--they all lost their wives, their families. People say, 'What happened to you, Carl? All of them went on to superstardom. Where'd you go?' I say, 'I went home.' And that's a good place to be." (3)

Carl Perkins made a choice not to follow the star of fame with the same intensity as some of his contemporaries. He felt that his star was at home. Sometimes that is a wise choice to make. Still, if we all chose to stay at home, the world would come to a grinding halt. The three Magi were men of action.

And they were men of determination. Theirs might have seemed to be a foolish adventure at times--following this star they had seen in the East. But they persevered until the star they followed came to rest over a house, and they knew their journey was complete. I love it when people follow through on a noble task and see it through until it is completed--whether the task is building a business, or a home, or a ministry, or whatever star they may be following.

Mary Kay Ash, who built Mary Kay cosmetics into a corporate giant, once said this: "If we ever decide to compare knees, you're going to find that I have more scars than anyone else in the room. That's because I've fallen down and gotten up so many times in my life." (4) Those are the people who are successful in the world. People who refuse to give up. People who follow their star regardless of the obstacles.

Motivational speaker Earl Nightingale once told the story of an American team of mountain climbers who set out to conquer Mount Everest. Before the team left the U.S. a psychiatrist interviewed them. Each was asked individually, privately, "Will you get to the top of Everest?"

There was a wide assortment of answers. "Well, Doc, I'll do my best." "I'm sure going to try." Each knew how formidable was the challenge. But one of them, a slightly built team member, gave a totally different answer. When the psychiatrist asked him the question, he thought for a moment and then quietly answered, "Yes, I will." Not surprisingly, he was the first to make it to the peak of Mt. Everest.

Nightingale comments: "Yes, I will--three of the most potent words in our language. Whether spoken quietly, loudly, or silently, those three words have propelled more people to success and have been responsible for more human achievement than all other words in the English language combined." (5)

The Magi were men of action, men of determination. They were "Yes, I will" people. But more than anything else, the three Magi were men of faith. As they told King Herod, they were following their star that they might worship the one who had been born king of the Jews. The three wise men came with pure hearts. Their purpose was worship and praise. They came not to find gold, but to find God. Their purpose was to offer up gifts to their Savior and Redeemer.

One of the oldest Christian legends is the charming story concerning the Well of the Magi near Bethlehem.

The people of Bethlehem made a practice of going to this well during Christmas week. There they would bend over the opening of the well and cover themselves and the opening with blankets or cloaks, to shut out the light of day. Then, as they peered into the dark well, the star of Bethlehem, according to this pious practice, could be seen moving slowly across the water--but only by those who were pure of heart. (6)

The three Magi would certainly have seen the star, just as they did 2,000 years ago. Why? Because they were pure of heart. Because their priority was worship and praise. Because they were men of faith. I wonder if such a star should appear in the heavens this night whether you and I might see it. Are our hearts pure enough? Is our faith real enough? Theologian John Calvin once said, "If the sight of the star had so powerful an effect on the Magi, woe to our insensibility, who, now that Christ the King has been revealed to us, are so cold in our inquiries after Him."

Follow that star. People who make a difference in the world are not content to sit on the sidelines. They set their sights on a worthy star and they follow it with all their hearts. Of course, the most magnificent star that we can follow is the same today as it was in the time of the Magi. It is the star of Christ, himself. Bowing before him in adoration and praise and offering the gift of ourselves.

Is there a dream in your heart? The richest place in the world is the cemetery. It is filled with songs that were never written or song, stories never told, businesses never started, inventions never invented. It is never too late. Follow your dream, follow that star and you will know the joy of the wise men.

2. Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt, *Megatrends for Women* (New York: Villard Books, 1992), p. 276.

3. Source unknown.

4. Deborah Ford with Edie Hand, *The Grits (Girls Raised in the South) Guide to Life* (New York: Plume, 2003), p. 230.

5. Pastor Dan Mangler's Sunday Sermon, Shepherd of the Mountains Lutheran Church, ELCA Estes Park, Colorado [http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday\\_sermons/january\\_16\\_2005\\_sermon.html](http://www.smlc-elca.org/Sunday_sermons/january_16_2005_sermon.html)

6. St. Gregory of Tours (594), *Libri Miraculorum (Book of Miracles)*. Cited in Francis X. Weiser, *The Christmas Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952).

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