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 A little boy attended his first symphony concert. He was excited by the splendid hall, the beautiful people in all their formal finery, and the sound of the large and enthusiastic orchestra. Of all the instruments in the orchestra, however, his favorite was the cymbals. The first loud, dramatic crash of those brass disks won him over without reservation. He noticed, though, that most of the evening the cymbal player stood motionless while the other musicians played. Only occasionally was the cymbal player called upon to make his contribution and even then his time of glory was quite brief.

After the concert the little boy's parents took him back stage to meet some of the musicians. The little fellow immediately sought out the cymbalist. "Say, mister," he asked sincerely, "How much do you need to know to play the cymbals?"

The musician laughed and answered, "You don't have to know much at all. You only have to know when."

Someone has said that timing is everything. Joseph Duveen, the famed art dealer, had among his clients some of the world's richest and most important collectors. There was one distinguished collector, however, that Duveen hadn't been able to add to his portfolio. That was the very knowledgeable and discriminating collector, Andrew Mellon.

To rectify this situation, over a period of time, Duveen put together a fabulous collection of valuable pieces of art with which to lure Mellon. Finally, one day he was ready to make his move. He leased the apartment directly beneath Mellon's in Washington and covered the walls with masterpieces. Then, before returning to New York, Duveen offered Mellon the key to the apartment and invited him to drop in whenever he wanted to look at the art.

It took only one visit. Mellon was hooked. He couldn't stay away. He came back night after night and stayed for hours admiring the paintings. Finally, he called Duveen; he was ready to deal. He bought the entire collection for $12 million. (1)

Duveen took his time to create a need, then filled it. That is precisely what God did through the thousands of years preceding the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness. God had been building the need for a Savior in human beings, making the need for the Messiah ever clearer and urgent. Thousands of years of man’s inhumanity to man. War. Genocide. Crime. Murder, Chaos and destruction. By the time John came on the scene, people were ready. The evidence of our sin, of mankind’s total depravity, was irrefutable. John the Baptist's ministry was the final chapter. The people were ready. And history has never been the same.

It was of John the Baptist that the prophet Isaiah wrote centuries before:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

In ancient days when an Oriental king planned to visit a distant part of his kingdom he sent a messenger ahead to announce the coming visit. The messenger's job was to tell the inhabitants to prepare for the king's coming - much as communities today prepare for a visit by the President or the Pope.

In those days the roads were often in poor condition. Thus, the people were expected to repair the roads so they would be smoother for the king.

Often the roads had to be straightened and the hills cut down. Doubtless, this was what Isaiah had in mind when he wrote these words of comfort and hope for his people. The King is coming. A voice cries, in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Get ready for a royal visitation.

Suppose you and I were on the committee. Suppose we had been chosen to make certain that the advent of the monarch was a grand success. We can think of several things we would do to prepare for a visitation by an earthly king - parades, ceremonies, the best china, a spotless house. Preparing for the “What if?” What if the King of kings were to call?

Advent is a time of preparation. We are getting ready to celebrate the birthday of the King. But suppose he didn't come as a tiny babe this time. Suppose he came in all the maturity of the Godhead. Suppose he came as our reigning Monarch. How would we prepare?

IF YOU AND I WERE ON THE COMMITTEE TO RECEIVE THE KING OF KINGS, FIRST OF ALL, WE WOULD WANT TO GET OUR COMMUNITY READY.

We are a community minded folk. It is not enough that our own grass be mowed, and our own door freshly painted where the dog scratched. We take pride in our town and our neighborhood. The trash in our neighbor's yard diminishes the worth of our own property. The junkyard at the turnoff from the highway troubles us every time we pass it. Maybe a visit from the King would be the motivation we need to do something about the appearance of our community.

This time of year, we will often see the letter X used to abbreviate the word, "Christ." Thus Christmas becomes "Xmas." Objections are often raised to this. Actually, the letter X was used repeatedly by early Christians as a coded sign for Christ. In Greek, the letter X is the first letter of the word Christ. In the early days when Christianity was an outlawed religion, Christians would often take a stick and mark the letter X in the dirt alongside the road as they walked. Anyone who saw it knew what it meant: "A Christian has passed this way." You and I do not need to scrawl Xs on sidewalks now. There is no law against being a Christian. But I do wish there was more evidence in our community that "a Christian has passed this way."

George Buttrick once noted that in the Middle Ages cities were not as sanitary as today, but the Church spire rose above them. There are still churches in cities, of course, but now almost everything else rises above the church: ”banks, office buildings, factories, cell phone towers. In the Middle Ages as you scanned your town’s horizon the church could be identified above all. That tower pointing toward the heavens. It would be very hard to pick out a cross or a spire on the skyline of today's cities. Maybe we should scrawl an X on the sidewalk, to let people know that a follower of Jesus has passed this way.

How do we make the church visible today? With all the edifices towering over it. Perhaps if our town knew we had passed this way, as they walk along the road, they saw the church helping the widow (there’s an X), mentoring the orphan and fatherless (there’s an X), feeding and clothing the poor and homeless (there’s a another X), visiting the prisoners (Xs all over the place).

Do we not know the King is coming and we need to get our neighborhood and our town ready?

WE ALSO NEED TO GET OUR FAMILIES READY. After all, our first responsibility is to those closest to us.

In a Family Circus cartoon, the little girl sits her baby brother on her lap and tells him the story of Christmas. According to her version: Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole surrounded by eight tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes. The three Wise men and elves all sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree. It was Frosty the Snowman who saw the star.

Her confusion is understandable. There is a lot to learn about Christmas. Who does the teaching in your home? Someone better or the kids will piece it together from the least reputable sources.

In 2019, a man named Chris Nikic became the first person with Down syndrome to complete an Ironman triathlon 1. An Ironman triathlon consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26.2-mile run. Chris completed the race in 16 hours, 46 minutes, and 9 seconds 1.

Chris’s father, Nik Nikic, was his biggest supporter throughout the race. Nik ran alongside Chris for the entire marathon portion of the race, encouraging him every step of the way 2. When Chris crossed the finish line, Nik was there to give him a big hug and congratulate him on his incredible achievement 2.

The Nikic family’s story is a testament to the power of love and family values. Nik’s unwavering support and encouragement helped Chris achieve something that many people thought was impossible. Their story is an inspiration to people all over the world. You see your parent doing things like that - it's the greatest lesson in the world!"

We are all influenced by our mother's life, our father’s life. We adopted their values; they live on in us.We have a duty before God to make them values worth adopting

Have you prepared your family for the coming King? Chances are that you HAVE transmitted to them your values. That almost always happens in families. The question is, will they feel uncomfortable in the presence of the King with the values that you have given them? Will those values be appropriate for the kind of King we are awaiting? If we were on the committee we would want to prepare our communities. We would want to prepare our families.

FINALLY, WE WOULD WANT TO PREPARE OURSELVES.

Now, let me tell you: It’s importance to being ready in life, to be the right person in the right place at the right time with the right thing to do.

Many of you may know the name Brandon Aubrey, and a few of you know his story. He is a former professional soccer player. Aubrey was a first-round Major League Soccer draft pick and played for several teams before transitioning to American football after being signed by the Dallas Cowboys. He made his NFL debut in 2023 and quickly made a name for himself. In his first game, he made a 60-yard field goal, setting a new NFL record. Aubrey’s success continued throughout the season. He made multiple field goals of at least 59 yards, becoming the first NFL kicker to do so. He also made history by scoring three 50-plus yard field goals in a single game, with an average kick distance of 53.5 yards per field goal attempt. A few weeks ago he scored two field goals, one 59 yards and the second 60 yards, an NFL record. No one has kicked two like that in a single game before. (note as of 12-12-23 he is 30 of 30, no misses. Check for updates on this stat.) Aubrey’s impressive performance earned him the NFC Special Teams Player of the Month award.

Aubrey’s story is a testament to being ready when your chance comes and recognizing it might come from a surprising place. Despite being a newcomer to the sport, he was able to make a significant impact and set new records.

General Douglas MacArthur, from his own experience once said, "Preparedness is the key to success and victory."

Henry Ford put it this way: "Before everything else, GETTING READY is the secret of success."

Are you ready for the King? I'm not asking if you have finished your shopping or if the tree is up or if you made the last payment on your Christmas Club account. Is your heart ready to receive the King of Kings? Prepare the way of the Lord. Store owners want us to know that there are only a limited number of shopping days left before Christmas. They don't know that the situation is a lot more important than that. The King is coming. There is only a short time to prepare for a royal visitation and you and I are on the committee. There is a lot to do in our community. There is a lot to do in our homes. And, for some of us, there is a lot to do in our own hearts.

1. FUNNY, FUNNY WORLD, July, 1985

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Child

Good morning, boys and girls. Sometimes we get very busy at Christmastime buying gifts and wrapping them in pretty paper like this and forget the true meaning of the season. There is an old Christmas story from Russia that tells about a lady who also made that mistake. It's called BABUSHKA. According to this tale, a Russian peasant woman named Babushka was visited by the 3 Wise Men who invited her to accompany them to visit the newborn King. Too busy polishing, cleaning, and sweeping her cottage, she delayed joining them until the next morning, when it was too late to catch up with them. So she struck out on her own to find this new King.

In her attempt to find the child-King, Babushka searched all over. She always carried with her sweets or small toys in her pocket to bring as her gifts to the King. Years went by as Babushka looked into the eyes of all the children she could to see if she could see the king. In fact, sometimes Babushka would go into the nursery of some home to see if the baby sleeping there was the new-born King. She would leave a treat on the pillow beside the child's head.

Years later, Old Babushka continues her search. In Russia today a gift appears near a newborn baby as a sign of Babushka's presence, evidence that she is still seeking the child who was born a King.\*

I am glad, aren't you, that we don't have to search for the King that was born in Bethlehem? His name is Jesus and we can read all about him in our Bibles and we can know him in our hearts. But let's not make the same mistake Babushka made. Let's not get too busy and forget the reason for the season--to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Adult

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 in 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.

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