

Your Guiding Star
January 12, 2020
(Delivered January 19, 2020)
Matthew 2:1-12

Growing up, my parents took my brothers and me on a number of road trips. If there's one thing I'll never forget about those road trips, it was all the planning that went into making them happen, particularly in the category of "route planning." My parents have been members of AAA for as long as I can remember, and when we were going on road trips, they always went to get either these huge books that had road maps of all 50 states in them or they would go to the local AAA to get the maps of the states they needed. My parents would then pour over these maps, highlight what major roads they wanted to take to get there, and then we'd use those maps to get to our destinations. Occasionally, as time went on, they would go online to Mapquest or Google maps and print out directions, but my dad liked highlighting his maps. So, I don't recall them doing that very often. In addition, those online directions weren't exactly the most-reliable sources. As a middle school student, I discovered that if you went on one of those sites and typed in "San Francisco, CA" as your starting point and "Tokyo, Japan" as the destination, one of the directions would invariably be "swim 5,138 miles." So, highlighting was the way to travel throughout my childhood.

As time went on, my parents stopped relying upon road maps, highlighters, and potentially-misleading online directions, instead getting GPS's they could plug into their cars. They now have cars with GPS built in, just as every smartphone nowadays does. Now, you can enter where they wanted to go, where you're starting from, even saying "current location" and it will give you turn-by-turn directions along the way. Undoubtedly, this seems to have become the common practice, so much so that Ellen DeGeneres recently had a segment on her show where she challenged a Millennial, a member of Katie's and my generation, to fold a roadmap. As you can guess, this girl of 18 or 19 failed miserably, proving how reliant many people have become on apps like this to get where they want to go.

Unfortunately, life isn't like that. We can't plug in "current location" as our starting point and "Heaven" as our final destination to get step-by-step instructions as to where to go, what to do, what to say to whom, etc. While we know our final destination is Heaven, none of us here knows where our exit ramp is or how much further it is until we get to exit. Along the way isn't much better either. We have some guidance along the way ("If you're on fire, stop, drop, and roll." "If someone bullies you, don't retaliate." "If a person says, 'no,' that means 'no.'"), but every one of those starts with "if," making them conditional. We don't know if we'll run into all the situations we're prepared for, nor do we know when we will. Then there's the stuff we just can't be prepared for and need to figure out on our own (e.g. the kind of person we love, how we learn best and how to optimize on that, who we can rely on in our times of need, etc.).

We are not alone in this experience. This has been the experience of every human in every place ever, even the wise men in today's reading. We can relate to the wise men in the reading today as they also had very little to go on. They looked up into the night sky, saw a new star, which could very easily have been just that, a new star, and nothing more. Still, they followed it, not knowing where it would lead, until they reached the baby Jesus wrapped in cloth and lain in a manger. Then, they are spoken to in a dream. We've all heard people say things in our dreams, and who's to say those messages are anything more than our subconscious telling us what we want/need to hear? Still, they listened to the angel in their dream who tells them not to

return to Herod, and they went home via a different road. Now, these signs, these messages, they are not grandiose. They are small, easily mistaken for something else if you don't look at it through a specific lens. However, what this tells us is that God is very active in guiding us, both through the grand actions and the small. The star, the angel, they are all means by which God guided the wise men, just as God guided the people of Israel in the wilderness with a pillar of fire. Here and now, God guides all of us. These actions in the story today are subtle, but they are guides nonetheless.

We all have those subtle things that guide us as well. A great example of a "guiding star" would be the words and/or actions of others. Growing up, I had many people at the church I was raised in tell me I would someday be a great pastor. Given that my heart was set on being a doctor, those compliments, those indicators, I paid them little heed, but I kept those suggestions in the back of my mind. Eventually, I realized that so many different people telling me the same thing might be a sign, something God wants me to hear and take to heart. I'm sure there are many of you out there who have been guided in such a way by the words/actions of another, whether they be family, friend, or a celebrity.

If not, another "guiding star" could be a strong character trait you have, one that almost serves as your conscience. Perhaps that's being a good listener, being humble, being loving, or something else. Still, there's that certain part of you that limits what you are allowed to say because if you go against those morals, those character traits, you feel guilty, dirty, like you're not "you." So, you strive to live, act, and speak according to what a humble person, a loving neighbor, a good listener, whatever it might be, does and says. You try to live into that character trait and exemplify it with your very being.

Still, there are "guiding stars" that come in the form of events that can be described as acts of God, those occurrences that simply cannot be anything short of divinely-acted-upon. Katie's and my meeting is a perfect example of that. Katie and I, at the time of our meeting, had both given up on love, because obviously there was no one out there for us, and that we'd at best be single parents. Then, hundreds of miles from home, we meet, we talk, and we fall head-over-heels for each other. This "act of God" guided us to give love one last chance, and now, here we are, two years and two weeks into marriage and still going strong.

In the end then, we must all consider how God is guiding us and to where we are being guided. Perhaps it's through another person's actions and/or words. Perhaps God is guiding you through a strong characteristic, that something that drives your ever action/word, like humility, love, balance/peace, etc. Maybe it's that isolated occurrence that seems too good to be simply coincidence, but rather seems divinely-inspired. We all have our guiding stars, just as the wise men did in the reading today. Therefore, I invite you to consider where and how God might be guiding you, both in this New Year with all its untold possibilities, and for the many years down the line, with even more-so untold possibilities.