



In the movie the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her companions are on a quest to find the wise man- the Wizard of Oz – the one they believe can fulfill all their dreams and needs. The wise men in today’s Gospel lesson are also on a journey. They are looking for the new King of the Jews.

By the end of the *Wizard of Oz* we know quite a bit about Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man – we know where they are from, what has brought them to Oz and why they are seeking the Wizard. On the other hand, we know very little about the wise men in the Gospel lesson. They only appear in Matthew’s Gospel - and only in these first verses of chapter 2.

We don’t even know how many of them there were. We do know there were three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. So there is some basis, then, for saying there were three wise men. We don’t know where they are from. Some speculate they were from Persia but we don’t really know. If they were from Persia they might have come from the area we now call the cradle of civilization - the place where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers meet and where some believe the Garden of Eden was. We are confident that these wise men were not Jews. That is, they were outside of the group of people to whom God was expected to appear, at least according to the Old Testament. Some have called them astrologers because they were aware of a new star and believed it had great significance. They were willing to follow that star to an unknown place.

Others label these men scholars, sages or Magi. And, some even think that they could have been women. However, I have it on good authority that if one of the Magi had been a woman, they would have brought “real” presents!

We tend to call them kings because the gifts they brought were expensive and rare. Tradition may call them kings to represent earthly kings recognizing the baby Jesus as the true king – the king of heaven, the Son of God, the Messiah. Even Herod, representative of the Roman government, acknowledged that the wise men knew something he did not. That the wise men sought Herod out to confer with him as to the baby’s location indicates that the wise men had power and authority in their own country. That Herod would even talk with them indicates the wise men were important people.

The wise men, going they knew not where and facing unknown dangers on the roads to get there, remind us of others in the Bible who heard God’s voice, had a vision or a

dream, or somehow felt compelled to leave their home in order to do the work of the Lord. Their belief- their faith- that something important was happening, was manifested in their willingness to take action.

Think about Noah. Noah is another one who acted on faith. God was going to blot out from the earth all humankind because of our wickedness. But, Noah was righteous and blameless and found favor with the Lord. And what happens? The Lord told Noah to build an ark. *Imagine that. Crazy (especially if you ever heard Bill Cosby's "Noah")*. But Noah is faithful and builds the ark. Noah saves his family and the animals. And from Noah's faithfulness come generations that lead us to Abraham.

Now Abraham is told by God to pack up his household and travel to a place that God would show him. No specific directions – just go where I will lead you. And Abraham does. He sets out with his family with no map, with no final destination in sight. Abraham acted on faith. Later on, when Abraham complains that he has no heir, God tells Abraham that he will have a son to carry on his line. Indeed, Abraham's obedience to God will result in Abraham's heirs outnumbering the stars in the sky. For this and other acts of obedience, Abraham becomes one of the pivotal figures in the world's three major religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Like Abraham, the wise men traveled to a country not their own. They had a mission: to locate the new King of the Jews. Today, we might question the significance of a new star and shake our heads at the thought of leaving our homes to go we know not where for we know not what. But for the wise men, the star was a signal of something great that was happening. The wise men had the courage of their beliefs to pick up and go. They persevered until they reached their goal. They brought gifts and gave homage to Jesus, the king of the Jews. The wise men become among the first, then, to identify Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah.

Today is both the First Sunday after Christmas and the Eve of the Feast of the Epiphany. We celebrate the wise men reaching Jesus and recognizing Jesus as the Christ Child. God made flesh. We are called, like the wise men - and like Abraham and Noah - to seek and to listen for God and then to act on what we understand God is asking us to do. We will not know all the twists and turns of the journey. We will likely have times when we will be anxious and the temptation will be great to turn aside from the journey. And, we may find that the end of our journey is not at all what we first thought when we started. We need to be prepared for the unexpected. We even need to be prepared to change our direction.

Think about how unexpected it must have been for those wise men to find the King of the Jews was a baby! A vulnerable baby born in a manger. A mother who was not wealthy or well-known. The wise men listened to God who helped them see the in-breaking of God's kingdom in an unexpected place and with unexpected people. It is an example of the Divine being made known to them and to us in unexpected ways.

We find wise men and women in unexpected places today if we will but open our eyes and our ears. There is a woman who has been an employee at a veteran's hospital in the

south for over 40 years. Every day she arrives with a big smile and a hello for everyone she meets. That hello and that smile brighten the day for men and women- and their families- who are facing significant medical issues even death. That employee is not a doctor, not a nurse- she is a housekeeper. In my book she's a wise woman: she has recognized a need: how to let everyone she comes into contact with know that he or she is worthy of being recognized as a child of God. She probably doesn't have much money. She gives of her time every day she goes to work. She gives of her talent – the gift of hospitality- each time she offers a smile and a hello. How can we do less?

Today we may not have a real-life baby to go and see. Today we may not even have a bright star in the sky to wonder about and to follow. But God is still with us. God still calls us to follow- even when we do not have a road map. Even when we can't "Google" our destination. God is present with us through Jesus the Christ.

The story of the wise men shows us that we do not need to know all the details if we will but trust God. In fact, those details might very well get in the way of God's message to us. For example, some claim that science shows us that God does not exist because we can now explain many things that were unknown at the time of Jesus' birth. God becomes for these people a "god of the gaps" –if they will even go that far.

Some believe that the star the wise men saw was the conjoining of Jupiter and Saturn. The placement of those two planets in the night sky overlapping each other would have made for a very bright phenomenon that the wise men could have followed. Whether this is true or not doesn't take away from the wise men leaving their home, traveling to a destination whose exact location was unknown to them when they started, and celebrating when they found Jesus. Notice that when the wise men arrived to see the child Jesus and Mary, his mother, they knelt down and paid homage to Jesus. They were not afraid to acknowledge that Jesus was the divine manifestation of God.

Another example of an American who lives his faith is Jimmy Carter. Mr. Carter's faith permeates his life and his life's work. In my opinion, his best work – and his enduring legacy- has been the work undertaken after he lost his re-election bid for President. He regularly spends one week a year building a home with Habitat for Humanity. His services are now available for conflict resolution in places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He is willing to put his own safety on the line to do what he believes God is calling him to do. Mr. Carter is a man who has heard God's call to use his resources – his time, talent and treasure- to further the work of God's kingdom on earth. Certainly, he is a man who has had unexpected turns in his life. He is a man who has had great disappointment and grief in his life. And yet he is a man who listens to God for ways to love and serve the Lord by offering his time, talents and resources

We don't know what happened to those wise men after they returned to their own country. We can hope that their lives were changed from having seen, first hand, Jesus, the Son of God and the Messiah. We do know that they were faithful to the call to pick up and go. They acted on their faith. They spent their time to travel to Bethlehem; they offered their resources in the form of their gifts; and they offered their talents by joyously celebrating when they found Jesus the Christ.

Dorothy and her companions found the Wizard of Oz to be an ordinary con man hiding behind a curtain manipulating levers to give the appearance of being wise. The wise men in Matthew's Gospel found the real wise man- Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah. Live in ways consistent with your faith so that God's love shines through your everyday activities. Be alert to ways we can love and serve the Lord. *Amen.*