

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

GPS (global positioning system) technology. It is very handy, powering maps on our phones that help us find our destinations. GPS guides you there -- just like Magi following a star. You don't even have to tell it where you are -- it knows! And if you make a wrong turn, it tells you so and recalculates its directions accordingly.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a GPS not only for our travels but also for our life choices? Destination: a long and prosperous life. Directions: anybody's guess. That's the problem. There is no set path that guarantees such an outcome. Do what you will, you can't avoid suffering and death.

But all is not lost. The Good News that comes with the birth of Jesus is that there is a path you can take that will guarantee you great joy and everlasting life. Yes, you will suffer at times and eventually we all will die, but your life will have meaning because you will have lived it for the sake of others. You will find immense happiness in sharing your gifts and recognizing the talents of others. You will feel overwhelming gratitude for the many blessings showered upon you. And believe me, when you count them, they are many.

You find this path by following your EPS -- eternal positioning system -- activated at your Baptism. The simple directions you receive are these: love, forgive, serve.

Why are so many of us reluctant to ask for directions? Maybe it's because we don't like to appear weak or fallible, though we are surely both. Maybe it's a self-esteem issue for some: We're too shy or we don't like to be a bother and halt another's progress. Or else it's the opposite problem: We believe too highly in our own interior compass. Whatever the reason, many of us would rather fumble around indefinitely and hope for the best than to ask for assistance.

But often in life, finding our way is more than a mastery of north, south, east, and west. When life fails to deliver on our expectations and assumptions, we may find ourselves traveling a dark and unfamiliar road where the only sure thing is uncertainty.

When the ancient prophets had visions of change, some predictions were terrifying but others were downright grand. In today's First Reading, Isaiah imagines that Israel, so long a backwater of the civilized world, would someday be an international destination. The riches that were so often carried out of its pillaged cities would one day return on caravans of camels. Its kings had been dragged from Jerusalem in chains into exile. But one day foreign kings would walk to Jerusalem, dazzled by the capital's radiance.

By the way, the difference between a camel and a dromedary is that a camel has one hump on its back, and a dromedary has two. That's why to this day, in the Middle East, when you go to rent a camel, the salesman will ask you, "One hump or two?" (Smiles and groans from the congregation.)

Today's Responsorial Psalm echoes the sentiment in imagining kings of Tarshish and the Isles, Arabia and Seba -- lords of elsewhere north, south, and west—paying tribute to Israel. If the biblical history of Solomon is to be believed, Israel enjoyed at least one hour of greatness that brought rulers from as far as Sheba to pay honor. So for the nation's seers, it was not impossible to conceive that Israel might one day recover that prestige.

No one would have to ask for directions to find their way to such a kingdom. They would simply have to follow their hearts.

The Magi – were they wise men, astrologers, magicians, priests, royalty? Who knows what the Magi were? The only other memorable reference in the New Testament to their profession concerns Simon *Magus*, who was a wonderworker of some sort at the time of the apostles.

We know that dealers in wonder are a mixed bag in the Bible. Some operate under divine authority and others dabbled in the occult. Still others were simply charlatans and rip-off artists. But if there can be good thieves, tax collectors like Matthew, and Pharisees like Paul, we have to admit that categories can be deceiving in the Gospels. If the Magi were occult leaders, they were also reliable ones.

How did the proverbial "wise men" become wise? How have you acquired wisdom in your life? Someone joked that wisdom is the sum total of the lessons

we learn in life just AFTER we could have used the information! What experiences, painful or otherwise, have taught you the most? How do you incorporate your hard-won wisdom into your day-to-day living?

What makes the Magi reliable is that they do not undertake their journey under their own will or their own modest powers. They are led: first by a star and later by a dream. This willingness to be taken by the Hand of Heaven and guided along the way is a sign of deep humility and a hearty amount of trust in a Higher Power. They clearly did not know the God who compelled their journey or their worship. Yet like children, they fell in behind the leadership of the star and went.

From whom are we most likely to take directions? Do worldly powers impress us enough to derail our path? Do we pledge allegiance only to our own authority, our own opinions, or our own will? Most of all, are we willing to take the journey of faith, an enterprise that requires us by definition to surrender, to change, and to grow? Are we willing to be led along a path we cannot predestine or control, toward a goal we only vaguely apprehend?

These are hard questions, but this is what the Epiphany demands of us. God manifests the divine presence before the world. But the only way to see it is to be led there like a child. How far will YOU go? What gifts do WE bring this day to the stable and place before the Lord and King?

Like the Magi, do we leave everything behind to meet him? Are we not more likely to be comfortable, to treat our encounter with Jesus Christ each Sunday as a pastime or a hobby or a task to be done with rather than seeing it as a pilgrimage toward a meeting with the living God?

Along the way, the Magi meet Herod. We know that Herod is a dangerous character, more interested in securing his power than welcoming God's king. The Magi don't know this and thus are wooed into trusting the lecherous ruler. The Magi are given the name of the city where they may find the unnamed king.

But there is also an ominous invitation. They're told to come back, to tell Herod where the newborn is so that Jesus' life may be ended.

Those who leave everything behind to encounter Jesus will also find along the way many Herods.

It is wise to ask ourselves who or what are the Herods in our lives? Is it our love of money, unreasonable politics, tempting addictions or pornography?

If we are to guard ourselves against the Herods in our lives, we must be prepared with the proper gifts to offer to Jesus Christ.

We must bring our gold. When gold is polished, it is possible to see one's reflection in this fine metal. On our pilgrimage to meet Christ, we must bring self-knowledge. This self-knowledge is not gained through taking online quizzes, but through the mirror of the Scriptures. We must see ourselves as creatures before God, incomplete before the Creator of the cosmos.

We must bring our frankincense. Frankincense is burned, producing the most pleasing of odors. We must come to Christ as those whose very lives produce a fragrant incense, wafting up into the heavens. Our whole selves are meant to be offered to the newborn king and thus to the world.

We must bring our myrrh. If we are to meet Christ, to love the King of Justice, we must die. Our first death is through baptism, dying to sin. But the Christian life is one of *ascesis*, dying to our desire for power and prestige. That's where we get the word ascetical and the phrase the ascetical life.

If we read the Magi's offerings in this way, we come to see that Epiphany is not just the feast but the very pattern of joyful, missionary discipleship each of us must embrace if we are to come and adore Christ the King all year long.

Let us bring the gold of our material wealth and physical possessions; the incense of those Spirit-moments and God-moments of our lives; the myrrh, the funeral oils of our suffering and pain, and lay them before the Lord. How far will YOU go? Come, let us adore him. AMEN!