

Star Following

One of the joys of being a parent is seeing the world from your child's eyes. When my family and I were living in San Diego, Allison would make me stop whatever I was doing and pause long enough to see the grandeur of the night stars. If we were coming home in the evening, she would get out of the car and stand in the driveway looking at the stars as if she were gazing right into heaven. Other times she would go to our backyard, sit in the gazebo and just gaze at all the stars in the sky.

It's so easy for busy adults to miss the grandeur that surrounds us. And that's sad.

In our Epiphany Gospel, the wise men took the time to look up and see a star shining in the night sky where no star had ever shone before. Think of all the people in those days who never even noticed that star. Yet, the star was there for all to see, the star that led to Bethlehem, to a stable, and to a very special baby.

The wise men saw the star and it whispered a message from God. "Come," it said, "follow me and I will show you something wondrous. I will show you a king unlike any other."

The wise men saw the star and understood its message, and they mustered the courage to leave their native land to journey where they had never gone before.

We, too, like the wise men, are called to follow a star, to leave our comfortable little ruts and venture out into the risky unknown. But our stars aren't usually in the sky. Our stars are God's vision of what our lives become, if we have the courage to be faithful to that vision.

Let me emphasize the word courage, because admittedly, star following is risky business, as the wise men found out. It means leaving safe, comfortable familiarity and venturing into unknown territory.

Star following is not a planned vacation, where everything is booked ahead of time and we know exactly what to expect. Rather it's a journey where we cannot always see clearly around the next corner, and where we may end up in a place altogether different from what we anticipated. Such a trip can be scary. After all, we like to be in control. We like to know where we are going, and how we are going to get there, and that there won't be any unpleasantness along the way; and if we can't be guaranteed that, well then, thank you very much God, we'll just stay home.

Theologian Dorothy Soelle said that "sin is when life freezes." And I think that is the kind of sin to which most of us are tempted, especially when we are relatively satisfied and content, and don't like change very much. Sin is indeed when life freezes, and the frozen, self-centered life is the opposite of star following which always involves risking, changing and growing.

How does star following happen for us? If, like the wise men, you have ever followed a star in your own life, you know that it often means a willingness to put the past behind you, to

focus on the future, to look forward and not backward. Yes, the past has value, but far more important is where we are heading, what our destiny is, and who we are becoming.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey used to point out that God is not like a carpenter who makes things complete and whole and static. Nor is God like a watchmaker who winds us up and leaves us on our own. God is more like the leader of a symphony or the author of a drama. God has an idea, a plan, and invites us individually and collectively to take part in fulfilling that plan, but we must choose to cooperate.

When a star shines in our lives, we need to respond by taking that first step, making that leap of faith and moving into unknown territory. Admittedly, that takes courage, but the risk is worth it. After all, it's the ones who follow their star, venture out and risk that change the world.

William Wilberforce lacked a purpose in life until he was advised by his priest John Newton, who was himself a former captain of a slave ship, to campaign for the abolition of slavery in the British Parliament. Wilberforce made the abolition of slavery his life's passion, followed his star, and Britain abolished slavery without a shot being fired.

William Booth walked the streets of London one night, seeing the squalor and misery of people, then came back to his house in the early morning and told his wife that God had placed upon his heart a ministry to the poor. And so began the Salvation Army.

Abraham Lincoln was born in the backwoods of rural Kentucky, self-educated to become a lawyer, and had a small

law practice in Springfield, Illinois. He had no business to even think about becoming President of the United States, but President he became at a time when the nation was in peril of dividing into half slave and half free. By sheer force of will and keen insight he won a civil war, kept the nation together, and ended slavery forever.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony were courageous advocates not only for women's suffrage but for human rights – and worked tirelessly to achieve their goals because the star shining in their lives would not accept “no” for an answer.

Franklin Roosevelt was confined to a wheelchair due to polio, and could not walk without 20 pounds of metal on his legs, but he became one of the great Presidents of the United States in one of the worst periods of modern history – the Great Depression followed by World War II.

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was seventy-six years old with one lung when he was elected Pope of the Roman Catholic Church – and today Pope Francis is shaking things up in a church noted for not rocking the boat.

And think of all those college dropouts who spearheaded the greatest information revolution in the history of the world – Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak of Apple Computer, Bill Gates of Microsoft, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook – to name just a few of the many upstarts who had an idea and ran with it – people who followed the star in their lives and changed the world.

It happens, doesn't it? People do the most extraordinary things when they follow their star, leaving behind their settled ways and moving into a challenging yet unknown future.

I know... it scary to venture out. But if there is a star shining in your life, then take that one small step, and then another, and then another, and soon enough you are well on your way in your journey. Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can – but move forward.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, "We must do that which we think we cannot."

Anne Frank, the Holocaust victim, wrote in her journal, "Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!"

Follow your star, even if that means moving from the safe, comfortable familiarity that you have always known and venturing onto new horizons that will challenge you, change you, and bring out the best in you.

Along the way you will have to take some risks, perhaps even surrender your own comfort. But as I read my Bible, I find that God won't let his people settle down. The message of the wise men to us is: accept the challenges and trust the Lord.

I'm sure the wise men never expected to end up where they did, but they believed and trusted God had led them to the

right place. That is the kind of trust and faith we need, the kind of trust and faith that star following teaches us.

One thing is certain: a star shines for you. The question is: Will you follow it?

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Text – Matthew 2: 1-11
Epiphany Sunday, B**