

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6-7, 2018
Christ the King
Kenner

Led by . . .

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

In the run-up to Christmas we had to ask our family members, more than ever before what they'd like as gifts. Deborah and I both needed a lot of guidance from our grown kids. We didn't want to do what we've so often resorted. So we asked for lists, the more detailed and shorter the better.

And they gladly complied - maybe because they were tired of getting stuff they'd never wear or use.

Of course, they gave up asking us what we wanted long ago and started sending us gift-cards, especially to some of the great restaurants in New Orleans. So if you happen to see us dining at some expensive place, be assured, it's on them.

And when it comes to choosing gifts for our grandchildren, we need a lot of guidance from their parents, because many of their suggestions are for items or brands we've never even heard of. I guess that's an experience pretty familiar to most grandparents.

It got me thinking about all the guidance given to the characters in the Christmas narrative. It begins with the annunciation to Mary that she will bear a child, the Son of the Most High. Then the guidance given to Joseph when he's prepared to break off their engagement. The angel tells him to take Mary as his wife and to name the child Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

And when the child is born in Bethlehem, angels appear to shepherds that night to announce the good news and to tell them where they will find the child.

And today, Epiphany, is the day on which the Church commemorates the visit by the magi, the wise men from the East. And as we know, they were guided by a star which appeared and then led them to Jerusalem. When they saw King Herod they asked him, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." Herod was frightened and called together the chief priests and scribes to ask where the Messiah was to be born. Led by the prophet Micah's words, they determined it must be in Bethlehem. So guided by the prophecy, off the wise men went, and the star led them again to the place where the child was. After their joyful visit, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to return to their country by another road.

Right after they left, an angel appeared again to Joseph, directing him to take Mary and the child and escape to Egypt because Herod was about to search for the child to kill him. The angel even told him to stay put in Egypt until he assured him it was safe to return to Judea.

So there we have it. All of these directions, all of this guidance given to Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wise men.

Which leads me to ask, what guidance do you receive? What are you led by?

I assume angels don't routinely appear to you with instructions. You've probably not been led on any quest by a bright star. Or warned about something in a dream.

So what do you rely on for guidance? What are you led by?

I suppose that's a rather novel question for those who consider life as rather random and purposeless, and who bounce from one thing to another without any clear intention or direction.

Or who subscribe to the notion that life is only a game and the one who dies with the most toys wins.

Deborah told me this week about a student of hers who says he just wants to make a lot of money when he grows up. I told her about a college student I visited in an intensive care unit of a hospital years ago when I was a campus pastor. She had attempted suicide, she said, because she had been told by her parents to get into a good college, where she should study hard to make good grades, so when she graduated she could land a good paying job so she could settle down and be happy, just like them. But, she finally realized, they weren't very happy.

In confirmation class we tell our kids that God has given each of them special gifts, interests, talents and abilities, for them to use in the service of others as led by God. Not to become rich, not just to make themselves happy, but to serve some purpose within God's creation. And to pray each step of the way for God's guidance.

Whose guidance do you rely on? By what or whom are you led? Your friends, your family, popular culture, your own instincts?

This issue grabbed my attention both because of the guidance given by God in the Christmas and Epiphany Gospels, and because of the way the Prayer for today, Epiphany, says it. "O God, on this day you revealed your Son to the nations by the leading of a star. Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives, and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives." That pretty much says it all doesn't it.

One of the things we marvel at in Jesus during this season of Epiphany, is how confident he was of the Father's presence with him throughout his earthly ministry. And how sure he was of his identity and of his purpose. He knew that he had come not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life, as he said, as a ransom for many. He came among us that we might have life and have it abundantly. He convinced us that God is love and that his love for us led him to send his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have life everlasting.

May I suggest that we all begin every day of this new year with today's prayer, "Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives, and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

