

## **Epiphany**

Our Gospel reading for today is one of those Bible stories that poses great difficulty for the strictly rational mind. The problem is that it raises some questions for which we have no answers. For example, there is the matter of the star that led the astrologers and “came to a standstill over the place where the child was.”

Any thinking person has to wonder about that. What kind of star was it? Were the astrologers the only ones to see and follow it? How did they know it was leading them to the newborn king? Was it near enough to the earth that they could actually tell over which city, even over which house it had stopped?

All of these are questions for which we have no answer and maybe never will. For that reason some people are inclined to discount this story and dismiss it as an ancient myth.

Well, be it known that I like answers about as much as the next person. I want my world, my self, and my faith to be as fully understood as is humanly possible. I am constantly seeking for answers and will continue to do so. But in the meantime, I am unwilling to live my life only within the limits of those things that can be logically explained and rationally comprehended. There are just too many things in this world that I love and enjoy but do not even begin to understand. I, for one, intend to leave some room in my life for wonder.

If this Gospel reading said nothing else to me, it does say at least that. The entire story is filled with a sense of wonder. Here is God communicating with men by way of the stars. That is a fascinating thought. I like to think that sometimes he does the same with me. And here are gentiles coming from miles away, maybe hundreds of miles, to worship in the

presence of a little boy who is called “King of the Jews.” What a marvelous picture that is. It foretells the truth that the gospel of Christ is God’s gift to the entire world. So I cannot answer all of the questions concerning our reading; but in the light of its message, I invite you along with me to leave room in your life for wonder.

That will not be easy to do. This old world has a way of pushing aside and snuffing out a sense of wonder. Just the routine of life can do it.

We live in a world where things move along with certain regularity. Night follows day, and day follows night. The seasons unfold at about the same pace year after year. Spring, summer, fall, and winter are as predictable as the cycles of the sun. In the midst of that entire steadiness, it is easy to become prisoners of the routine and forget just how wonderful life really is.

Thornton Wilder wrote a play about that, which he called “Our Town.” It is the story about Emily who lived in Grover’s Corners until she dies in her early twenties. Then she wants to go back and revisit her earthly life. After much discussion with her heavenly neighbors who warn her that she will be terribly disappointed, she is granted permission to relive any twenty-four hour period that she chooses. So she goes back to Grover’s Corners on her twelfth birthday.

She is amazed most of all at the dullness of her family and friends. There they are with so many wonderful things to see and do and experience, but they seem to be lost in a maze of the commonplace. She tries in vain to capture the attention of her parents, to make them see the beauty of each moment; but they are too involved in the worries of the day to even see its higher meaning. “How blind they are,” she says, “they live in a box.” Then

she asks the conductor, “Do any people ever realize life, all of it?” “No,” he answered, “I don’t suppose they do.”

Just the daily demands of living can rob us of our sense of wonder. So let us be grateful for a story about some men who broke through the veil of routine and followed a star to Bethlehem.

We should also keep in mind that there is a kind of sophisticated intellectualism, which would take away the wonder of life.

And I am not thinking now of genuine scholarship and real wisdom. Those who truly know are most aware of how much they do not know. For these scholars we can all be grateful. But there is a kind of adolescent arrogance, which thinks that science will one day explain everything and eliminate all mystery from life. To believe that must surely be the ultimate ignorance.

From childhood most of us remember a little poem that started out; “*Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are.*” Well, recently I came across another version of that poem. It goes like this:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*  
*I know exactly what you are.*  
*Teacher told me yesterday,*  
*You are eight hundred million miles away.*  
*You are only whirling mass*  
*Of “C” and “N” and hydrogen gas,*  
*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,*  
*I don’t wonder what you are.*

There is no question about it - through the efforts of science, we have increased our knowledge about the stars. And in the future, we will no doubt

learn much more, all of which I salute. But to some of us that little star will remain “up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky.”

The advance of scientific knowledge increases, rather than eliminates, the mystery of life. The more we know, the more we become aware of how much there is that we do not know. Real wise men are always filled with a sense of wonder.

Finally, we should be warned that the selfishness and cynicism of this world could rob us of this sense of wonder. Herod tried to do that to the wise men, and that same spirit is still among us.

In his autobiography, Andrea Gide recalls an experience from his youth. It was a warm spring day. He was sitting in arithmetic class, but all of his thoughts were out of doors. Inevitably, his mind wondered and his eyes drifted toward the open window. Suddenly, he was utterly amazed at what he saw. There on the windowsill at that very moment, a caterpillar was becoming a butterfly. He watched with awe as those beautiful wings began to emerge from the casing of the cocoon. Finally, he could contain his excitement no longer and shouted to his teacher and classmates to come see this wonderful thing that was happening.

All of the children gathered around, but the teacher was impatient with this needless disturbance. He rebuked Andrea for his uncontrolled enthusiasm, reminding him that this event really wasn't marvelous at all. It happened all the time, and everyone except the very simple knew that and paid little or no attention to it.

Gide said something happened to him that day. He was embarrassed and ashamed. His capacity for wonder was badly wounded, and it took a long time for it to heal.

That, I suppose, is one of the worst things that any adult can ever do to a child. The capacity to wonder is God's gift to our little ones, and none of us has a right to take it away. We should not do that to anyone; and most of all, we should not do that nor allow the world to do that to ourselves.

This is the first Sunday of a new year and a new decade. We do not know what lies ahead. There will be hurt and heartaches, pain and problem aplenty. But there will also be many marvelous things. May God give us the eyes to find and the heart to feel just a few of them. The real wise men in this world leave room in their lives for wonder. **Amen.**