

The magi are mysterious and intriguing characters in the Bethlehem story, the story of God’s coming to be with us in the child Jesus. The word “wise” is most often associated with the men from the east, but other words should come to mind when we think of them. The magi *were* intelligent and they did the hard work of mining the possibilities of their intellect. Surely they were wise, learned men, but they were also humble. It is a rare and precious combination in human nature, great giftedness and great humility—true greatness, true wisdom, is always a combination of gift and humble gratitude for the gift.

This morning another word came to my mind: *intrepid*. I looked it up. Listen to the list of synonyms from the dictionary and think of the magi and their long journey from the faraway and exotic east: *intrepid—fearless, unafraid, undaunted, unflinching, unshrinking, bold, daring, gallant, audacious, adventurous, heroic, dynamic, spirited, indomitable.*

I especially like the word *undaunted*. As they studied their scrolls in a distant land, something stirred in their imagination, and they were captured by a vision. It became their passion. Think of the choices they made to focus their lives on this one pursuit—to follow the light of their

inspiration. They sacrificed times of pleasure with friends, they set aside other ambitions in the communities where they lived. They turned toward the light that began to shine in their minds and hearts.

It is a good definition of faith—the faith that breaths life into our hopes and brings light to the richest possibilities of being alive. Something happened to the men and they were captured by faith and hope. They began to follow the light of the vision of a newborn king, *the* king worth seeking, the Presence of God on earth. It was the light that would lead them home to the place of their deepest desires.

Many years ago I was running on a forest trail on the Marine Corps base at Quantico, Virginia. It was summertime and I was training for the Marine Corps Marathon scheduled for the first week in November. I was physically and mentally fit and the pace was steady, and I lost track of time and of where I was in the forest. It sounds foolish, but I was really lost and I didn't know if I was running back to the barracks or further into the Potomac wilderness. I was completely lost, running out of energy; the sun was going down quickly and I was disoriented in the gathering darkness. I panicked a little bit, and began to imagine some long hours in the dark. That was when I saw the beacon light from the base water tower. It

was over a mile away, but the light was steady and I began to walk in its direction. My body insisted that I was finished running for the day. Slow and steady, undaunted, I followed the light home.

I read a prayer this morning by Thomas Keating. It is about the Presence we call God. I'd like to share it with you.

*The Presence [of God] is so immense, yet so humble;  
awe-inspiring yet so gentle;  
limitless, yet so intimate, tender and personal.  
I know that I am known.*

*Everything in my life is transparent in this Presence.  
It knows everything about me—  
all my weaknesses, brokenness, sinfulness—  
and still loves me infinitely.*

*The Presence is healing, strengthening, refreshing—  
just by its Presence.*

*It is nonjudgmental, self-giving, seeking no reward,  
boundless in compassion.*

*It is like coming home to a place I should never have left,  
to an awareness that was somehow always there,  
but which I did not recognize.*

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The wise men's journey covers miles of geography; they traveled through many lands following the light that would bring them home. It is a tender irony, that they could have stayed in the east and been found by the spirit of the babe of

Bethlehem. Their journey was real, but it is a metaphor for our journey to our awareness the Presence of God. We follow the light of scripture, the light of the best of our history as a church, and the light of our deepest desires. The Quakers tell us we all have an inner light of the spirit or the soul—it is the light of God’s Spirit showing us the way home—home to a place we should never have left, home to an awareness of the infinite, eternal Presence we have always suspected but never recognized. The Holy Spirit is the light of the star of Bethlehem leading us to Christ and the home that is always there.

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I have another entire second movement to this morning’s sermon most of which I will lay aside for another day. It about the heart the magi brought to Bethlehem. They did not make the trip to receive something—they journeyed to bring gifts to the king, gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each gift means something important about the life that lies ahead for Jesus. The magi brought their gifts, but most important, most essentially they brought their faith and their praise. They were overwhelmingly blessed by being in the Presence of God; they worshiped and they praised him.

Warned in a dream they went back to their own country by a different way. Of course it is part of this specific dramatic

narrative—but there is a universal truth suggested in their return to their old world. They return by a different way to avoid Herod, but they must go back by a different way because they are different. They have been changed by the journey and by being in the Presence of God’s Son. When they get off their camels and shake off the dust of the road at the end of their journey they will walk into familiar rooms and settle into familiar places—but everything has changed for them. They will never be the same.

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People sometimes tell me they don’t come to church because they “don’t get anything out of it.” I understand what they mean—and it is true that many of us too often measure the meaning of our worship by what we receive. The wise men brought gifts to worship the child because they felt the privilege of the gifts they had already received.

Like them, we have already received more than we can fully appreciate or ever give thanks for—the breath of life, the awareness that we exist, the love of family and friends, the surrounding beauty of creation, the gift of our senses.

The wiser we become through the years, we also realize that our struggles and disappointments are also gifts; all life’s

challenges are gifts. Someday, in the heart of God, we may even understand that the pain of loss is a gift.

For those who follow the light of Jesus, who live at home in the Presence of God, all life is a gift—the bright, luminous moments and the times in the shadows. *Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, **for thou art with me.***

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I've printed a copy of Thomas Keating's prayer for you to take with you today. I encourage you to make time to sit with the prayer several times in the coming week—perhaps in the morning and in the evening.

Read the prayer aloud slowly and thoughtfully, two or three times. Then settle in with a line or a phrase that engages you in a special way—comforting or challenging, confusing or enlightening. Read it one more time aloud and sit in silent contemplation for several minutes—as long as you are able or as long as you feel is good. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you know God is with you. Allow yourself to be blessed in God's Presence.