

Once upon a time, a certain king was wealthy beyond measure. But he wanted to be spiritually rich, too. He wanted to know and serve God.

"One night he was awakened by a loud stamping on the roof. Alarmed, he shouted: 'Who's there?' 'A friend,' came the reply. 'I've lost my camel.' 'You stupid fool,' the king screamed: 'Looking for a camel on the roof?' 'You fool!' came the answer, 'Looking for God in gold and jewels?' Those words led the king to examine his life, change his priorities, and set him on the path to sainthood.

The camel on the roof raises the Epiphany question, "Where are you looking for God?" Really looking? It's not a question of church attendance, or bible study, or such things, but of what you've made the ultimate concern of your life, what you've given your life to. As Bob Dylan sang, "You're gonna serve somebody!" No avoiding it. What's it gonna be? Where have you found your god?

Today's gospel raises the camel-on-the-roof question. It's a reminder that God isn't found where the world expects, not in what the world says we ought to know, nor in what it says we ought to serve.

The story of the magi has much to teach us about these things.

Much to teach us, first because of who they were - gentiles, outsiders, not part of the family! They lived a very different reality; they didn't belong. Yet, they journeyed and sought the savior. We assume God's to be found among people like us, that what God does is for people like us. So, we also doubt that those from very different realities can ever know God. But this story says that what God's done in Jesus is for all people, not just for us and those like us; God's up to some-thing much greater than serving our interests, making us safe, secure, comfortable, successful. And that means that the goodness of God's love, the goodness of what God's done, can be received and known by all people, even those from very different realities. All people can love and serve God!

Much to teach us, second, because of what they were called - Wise Men! Were they wise? At first, it seems, not very. Certainly not shrewd or calculating! They may've been experts about the stars, but they act like absent-minded professors, totally unaware of the turmoil their coming will create for Herod. They go to Jerusalem first, expecting to find the child there. Herod would obviously find their questions about the new king very disturbing. They're naively honest with him about all they know. But if you think about what the child in the manger grew up to teach about becoming like children in order to enter the Kingdom of God, their innocence shows the kind of wisdom he hoped for in us all.

But the story shows that their wisdom goes beyond their innocence to their actions.

That's the other way the story can teach us - through what these gentiles, these outsiders, did.

First, they took a journey, left where they were and went a long way to get somewhere else. That's what a journey is - leaving where you are and what you've been doing, to go see, experience, understand, be in relationship, somewhere else. Taking a journey's never as convenient, comfortable, or easy as staying where you are, doing what you've been doing. Journeys always involve uncertainty. But taking a journey implies that you hope to find something worthy of your time, energy, and effort.

Why did they take the journey? Because they hoped the star would lead them to what God had promised one people, but which was really for all people. Even though they weren't part of "God's people," they trusted that what God would do for one people, would really be for all. They trusted that salvation was for them too. So they journeyed because they were grateful and wanted to show it.

We want God's salvation to be a blessing of the life with which we're comfortable. We don't want it to mean inconvenience or uncertainty, leaving to go elsewhere, with our priorities, values, trusts, or serving. We'd like it just to bless and secure us as we are. This story says it calls us to move from where we are. That its for all who are willing to get up, leave the familiar and comfortable behind,

and go where God wants them to be. If we're looking for God, we've got to be willing to journey.

And once they got there what did they do? "Fell down and worshipped him." Herod had said, "Bring a report back so that I too, may go and worship him." Of course, that's not what he really wanted to do. Fearful about his own power, focused on himself, not God, he wanted to kill the child. But they humbled themselves, submitted to the child's authority. They focused on God's holiness, not their own security. Trusting that God sent had this new king for the good of all, they worshipped him.

In our sophisticated, cynical age, there's little about which we feel reverence. The only thing we're likely to give ourselves to, is our own advancement, self-fulfillment. The only somebody we can imagine serving is ourselves. This story reminds us that there's somebody else more worthy of our service, our reverence, and best efforts – God's gift to us, the child of Bethlehem. Through him we find the light to walk through life; without him we continue to stumble in the dark.

We are gonna serve somebody. It makes a difference who it is. Before their journey, like the rich king, like so many today, the Magi had gone their own way in life, interested in God perhaps, but serving something or somebody as just another way of serving themselves. But by coming to the child they were changed. And so, the story says, they "departed another way" – the way God wanted them to go. Once you bow down and worship this child, you're never the same; you go another way. He's the one somebody we can serve that sets us free to do and to be all God wants us to do and be.

We see it in the other thing the magi did. "They offered him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh." At Christmas we receive God's gift in Jesus. Epiphany's the time for us to give a gift back to Christ, as the magi did, as worship, an expression of faith, gratitude, and love. We give gifts to what we truly love, are willing to give ourselves for. This story says that if we love the one who first loves us, we'll want to give gifts that express our love and gratitude for being so blessed and loved. That shows in what the Wise Men gave - the best they had: gifts fit for a king. What can we give God? If we love; are grateful, and truly want to serve; what can we give but the best we have?

The magi expected to find God in a palace. That's where power resided, so that's where they thought hope would come from. Today, we look to others powers for hope and offer them our praise, gifts, and service. This story calls us to be like the king's friend, ready to make fools of ourselves by asking the camel-on-the-roof question to those seeking God in the wrong places. To be like the Magi who journeyed to seek God's promised One and give their most precious gifts in gratitude and praise.

Many of us try to find God in securing ourselves and insuring that we get what we want. But Epiphany says that God's to be found in receiving, not grasping, in giving, not getting for ourselves.

That's the truth we have to share. We have a light to shine in the darkness, a light from God for the whole world. Neither God, nor hope, are in success and power. The good news is that God, and true hope, are found in a babe in a manger. It's news as startling as a camel on a roof - that a life that begins in such humble vulnerability and ends in such a painful, humiliating death, is God's salvation. This is our message of light to all people, a word of hope for an otherwise hopeless world.

And what is this message? "Bring your best gifts and offer them too! Your best gifts!"

The message doesn't come from the wisdom of the world, not from technology or science, nor financial success or security. No, it comes from the example of the magi, who point us to where the world's best hope, the world's only salvation comes: in welcoming Gods' best gift with our worship, bringing our best gifts in gratitude and praise. May God help us do that now and always.

O eternal God,

We are grateful that you not only allow us the privilege of attending to your birth,
.....but that you invite us, encourage us, draw us to know you.

Help us, as we are drawn to you, to search for that what would have us be so much more than we are.

Inspire and humble us enough to forget ourselves, move outside of ourselves,
and find ourselves by giving ourselves away.

And, then, bearing our gifts, kneel in the stable beside the royal Magi, and worship the holy child

And then, give him our best, our treasures, for his glory.

Help us, O God, to see the many opportunities to give him that gift.

Help us to see that it is whatever people most need from us:

our best, our most complete honesty, our most tender care, our most eager helpfulness.

Help us not be satisfied with giving what asks nothing of us and does not ask us to be truly changed.

Help us to see the opportunities we have to give our best every day:

in being honest in our words, faithful to our commitments, loving in our intent and actions.

We thank you, God, that you did not leave us in darkness, but gave us Jesus, the light of life;

for the wonder of who you are as revealed in Jesus, the Christ;

for the assurance that in Jesus that you are moving all creation toward your promised future.

We pray for ourselves, that we keep our focus upon Jesus to know who and whose we are;

that we be sensitive to your ongoing revelation in Christ as we listen to him in daily life;

that as we follow closely after Jesus, we may be molded by his Spirit and express his life in us.

We pray for others, for those who look for you, that their eyes be opened to see and know Jesus;

for an encounter with your love for those who try to find your revelation through reason alone;

for those confused about life direction, that they find knowledge of your will and way.

We pray for those known to us with special needs: