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Looking up in hope, moving forward in faith

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” (Matthew 2:10)

Millions of stars were shining in the sky. Three wise men from the east – “stargazers,” some may call them – were studying a particular star. Like their contemporaries, they believed that each human being receives a star at birth: important persons a bright one and common people a rather inconsiderable one. Impassioned to observe the stars and, even more important, driven by a longing for wisdom and understanding, they were not satisfied to observe this star from afar.

I am sure the wise men would have had a number of reasonable excuses not to pursue the star, such as time, travel costs, danger or duties at their science institute. They could have easily stayed at home and continued their daily business, maybe publishing sophisticated essays or holding popular lectures on the extraordinary celestial phenomenon.

But there is no journey without departure. So the wise men set out with longing in their hearts, in a sense representing God-longing people of all times. All they have is a star – unreachable, untouchable – and yet a sign of hope. Spurred on by this hope, they have the courage to lift their eyes from the ground, from what keeps their minds occupied every day, to risk the journey and see the fulfillment of prophecy.

Today, millions of people are discovering that the promises of all kinds of “isms” – capitalism, racism, consumerism, materialism, extremism – are empty. They are realizing that there is more to life than just being a consumer fulfilling the needs of the market. The story of the three wise men reminds us that spiritual longing is universal. As human beings, we have an urgent need to anchor our lives in the hope of a living God acting in history in order to be set into motion. The story of the wise men encourages us to see the star as a symbol of hope, to satisfy our own spiritual longing for a better world than seems immediately possible and feasible. Our deepest hope may be easily buried under the debris of daily life. Illness, unemployment, loneliness, poverty, violence, church dissension and family problems —there are numerous reasons to lose hope – even though we cannot afford the luxury of hopelessness. Now more than ever, people are seeking the living God. People are looking for assurance of God’s love and justice. They seek an encounter with the living God. This is why we have to ask: Is the church, locally and globally, satisfying that deep yearning of many of our congregants? Do we allow our people to look for many interesting stars or help them to follow the special star that will lead to the manger of Bethlehem? Simply put, people are looking for a contextual spirituality of hope.

At the same time, we cannot produce nor buy hope. Hope is not the result of cognitive decision. But what we can and must do is open ourselves to the star of hope, which leads us to the Good News of Christ and gives us hope afresh. It is our call as Christians ministering to others to be ready to account for hope that we have in us (1 Peter 3:15).

Thus, motivated by such hope, the three wise men followed the star of hope, not knowing where it would lead them and when the journey would end. They don’t know where they will be the next day. But still

they press onward, their eyes lifted up to the star and not fixed on the ground. Apparently the exact location of the birth was unknown. So the three wise men searched for the child where most of us would search – in Jerusalem, the center of regional political power; the home of the aristocracy, the priestly class and the king's advisers; the holy city of God's dwelling.

And behold, immediately their enterprise was jeopardized. The one they seek was not there. This raises the question, where do we expect the in-breaking of the new? Where do we expect significant change for the better? To what, in this increasingly complex, threatening world, do we bind our expectations? Watching CNN, Al Jazeera or Deutsche Welle, we might lose sight of the star. Listening to politicians and decision makers, we realize that they are caught up in the present system and in their own self interest. We put high expectations on them but quickly find that they, like Herod, are interested in power and votes but not in justice. Palace, power, cult, military strength – the good news of Christmas teaches us that our hope is not to be placed in these things but rather – what foolishness! – in something seemingly marginal, silent and insignificant. In Zechariah we read that God comes, humble and riding on a donkey, putting an end to the machines of war and commanding peace to the nations (Zechariah 9:9-10). It reminds of my recent trip to Bangladesh, where I found in the poverty and humility of the people a fresh humanity.

Having reached a dead end, the wise men did not concede failure. They were courageous enough to admit, "We haven't found it yet; we need a fresh outlook." They were brave enough to continue hoping and lift their eyes toward the star once more, leaving behind their own assumptions as well as the wisdom of the powerful. Still linking their journey to the star, they departed afresh. And, interesting enough, having left behind the temple city and reopened themselves to the journey, the star once again becomes evident: "Ahead of them went the star ... "

I am deeply impressed by their about face. What a contrast to Herod and his wise men and scribes. Although they knew the prophecy, they remained in Jerusalem – static, caught in their own preconceptions and privilege, unable to be set in motion. Understandably, they fail to meet the new born Son of God.

It's a lesson for us each year, as well. Many of us try to follow the star of hope – and yet we experience the "not yet" of God's kingdom. We, too, notice that we are caught in a dead end, we have not found it yet. We, too, are attracted to the centers of power, influence and status. The first decade of the third millennium abundantly reveals the bind in which we are caught. Poverty is still a scandalous global reality. Manifestations of global warming have reached frightening levels, with millions of lives endangered, particularly in the global south. War and violence are omnipresent. Epidemics and pandemics are proliferating. Nations stockpile conventional and nonconventional armaments. Political and religious extremism is on the rise.

Living in the Holy Land is a challenging experience, too. The facts on the ground offer hardly any reason to hope. The "not yet" is omnipresent in daily life, causing feelings of helplessness and despair. Freedom, security and justice are not to be found, so many Palestinian Christians are depressed and opt to emigrate.

In a time of such despair, an ecumenical group of Palestinian Christians has launched "A Moment of Truth" (<http://www.kairospalestine.ps>). This "Kairos" document calls the people to be steadfast in the word of faith, hope and love and to recognize their responsibility to God and neighbor.

Surely both Palestinians and Israelis are dying for justice, security and reconciliation. Both seek a "savior" from this situation. Both seek signs of hope. At the present moment, they are living in a dangerous impasse of hopelessness and depression and, as a consequence, blaming each other for the lack of a shared vision for justice and peace. It's as though a well, which for years supplied them with water,

has gone dry. As they endure the many implications of the conflict, they feel dried out, just as the lack of rain has dried out their wells.

We are aware that we are not the only ones in need of the water of new hope in our wells. So, remembering the three wise men, let us together have a fresh outlook as we celebrate Christmas. Let us search for the star of hope and learn from the three wise men, who neither abandoned their hope nor gave up on their journey. At the same time, let us not avert our eyes from the facts on the ground, for we are called to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18).

Sister Emmanuelle was a Belgian-born Roman Catholic nun who worked for many years among the *zabaleen*, the garbage collectors who live in the slums of Cairo, Egypt. She was often asked how she found the strength and confidence to carry on her ministry in the midst of sickness, poverty and death. "With my feet in the mud, but with my eyes on the stars," she'd answer.

"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Vulnerable, erring and hopeful human beings, the three wise men finally arrived at the manger, where the star had led them. As we celebrate Christmas, let us listen afresh to this story, which invites us to take the long journey of hope. Let us be set in motion by the message of the unconditional love of God, as the life, death and resurrection of the new-born child will testify. If we look only at the ground, it may leave us disillusioned and trapped in the contradictions and doubts of our world. Even if we are called foolish, even if there is no solution in sight, may we have the courage to lift up our eyes to the star of hope, to be inspired and guided by the Good News of Christmas: "Do not be afraid; for see? I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10).

Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year!

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