

The Epiphany of our Lord, Jan. 6-7, 2018  
St. Mary' Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
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35,526.

That's how many verses there are in the Bible.

There are 27,570 verses in the Old Testament, and 7,956 verses in the New Testament.

That's a lot of verses! Lots of those verses are hard to remember.

But some of the verses are so vivid that we know them almost by heart.

This is particularly true of the biblical verses which tell the story of Jesus' birth. The Christmas story is so engaging that even non-church-goers know the basic contours of the story.

We sing the Christmas story in our carols. We paint it and carve it. As you take the tacky light tour, you see the characters of the Christmas story in technicolor, plastic splendor!

There are 35,526 verses in the whole Bible. But when you count verses which tell the story of Jesus' birth, the total is... 180.

In that very small number of verses, we meet larger than life characters: Mary, Joseph, the angel Gabriel. We meet the shepherds, the angel choir.

Today we meet the Magi, those wise travelers from the east, who have come to offer gifts to the Christ-child.

When I heard these verses as a child, I was captivated by... the star. Matthew tells us that the star appears in the heavens.

The Magi, who pay attention to God's creation, somehow recognize that the star is a sign that the king of the Jews has been born. So they leave behind what is familiar, and these non-Jewish Magi follow the lead of the star.

*They want to be where Jesus is.*

When I was young, I thought that the star was like a heavenly GPS system. I thought that the star alerted the Magi to upcoming turns, maybe recalculating the route if traffic was bad between Damascus and Jericho. Perhaps the star somehow said to the Magi: “In 100 feet, bear right toward Galilee.”

I had a childish impression that the Magi, frankly, *had it easy*. They wanted to be where Jesus was, so all they had to do was to follow the star. God would make sure they didn’t get lost.

Wouldn’t life be easy if that’s how God worked? Wouldn’t life be easy if God gave us constant, clear instructions through a miraculous sign?

How easy life would be if God said: “You can’t decide which job to take, which college to go to, which car to buy? It’s ok – the star will show you!”

Wouldn’t life be easier if God said to us: “You’re not sure how to handle a difficult spouse, a sulking teenager, a rude coworker? The star will show you exactly what to do!”

Wouldn’t life be easy if God just gave each of us a shining, spiritual GPS system, which always told us what to do, and how to get close to Jesus.

But if you listened carefully to these few verses of Matthew’s Gospel, you may have noticed something strange. True, the Magi HAD seen the star... *at first*. The light of the star inspired them to start the journey. The star led them... for a while.

But in today’s verses, the Magi are... *lost*. For whatever reason, they cannot see the star right now. And how do we know that? Because they have stopped to ask for directions!

(Which may be proof that the wise men are actually wise women! Men never would have stopped to ask for directions! They would have kept going until they ended up in New Jersey...)

The Magi stop in Jerusalem and ask, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews?” If they could see the star, they wouldn’t need to ask! They are smart enough to know that they are lost. They use their brains to figure out what to do next: “if we don’t know how to get to where Jesus is, then we can ask someone else.”

They ask Herod. Herod is not happy. The Romans appointed him to be their puppet king. So a *new* king of the Jews is a *threat* to Herod. But Herod does not know how to get to Jesus either... he has to ask his experts. They are the ones who tell the Magi to go to Bethlehem.

As they head to Bethlehem, Matthew mentions that they can see the star again. In fact, they were

*overjoyed* at seeing it again... which means that they could not see it before. It leads them to the place where Jesus can be found. They offer their gifts. They bask in his presence. They worship the one they've been seeking.

At times, they could see God's guiding light. At other times, they couldn't see it. At times, God guided them down the right road. At other times, they felt lost.

At times, God offered them clear guidance about their journey. At other times, they had to use their brains and ask people for directions.

But, always... they wanted to be where Jesus was. And they never gave up on the star, even when the star was hard to see.

The Magi are not the strange wise guys with the heavenly GPS system that I envisioned as a child. The Magi are perfect companions for our spiritual journey. Because, like the Magi, we want to be where Jesus is. We want to be with Jesus. At some point in our lives, Jesus, the light of the world, inspired and fascinated us. And we started our spiritual journey.

But, like the Magi, sometimes we can't see God's light clearly. We get confused about our path. We lose our way. The night grows dark. "Why won't God make everything clear for us?"

When that happens, remember the Magi. They were smart enough to recognize that they had gotten lost. And when that happened, they used their God-given brains to think things through, and they were humble (and smart) enough to ask other people: "how do I get close to Jesus?"

Like the children being baptized this weekend, we all will have moments in life when it seems like God has taken us by the hand and is leading us through every twist and turn.

But then will come the moments when it seems like the star has disappeared, and the light of faith has grown dim.

Lord, I have cancer... where are you? How do I get through this?

Lord, I'm struggling to be a good spouse or a good parent. Where do I turn?

Lord, the world is a mess in so many ways. I know I'm supposed to help heal it. But I don't even know where to start.

Lord, I want to be like Christ and live like Christ and forgive like Christ, but some days faith is hard, and I feel lost. How do I get back on track?

Whenever the light has gone out of your sky, remember the Magi. They did not panic. They did not give up. They did not give in to despair.

They used the brain God had given them. They asked others how to find the right road. And they never lost their top priority: “we want to be where Jesus is.”

I want to be where Jesus is. So do you, I suspect. Well, he’s here. He’s in the people around you. He’s here in the Word. He’s here in the Eucharist. The story of his birth is only 180 verses long. The story of your life will only make sense if you let his love be the light of your life.

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