

“Following Shiny Objects”

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My name is Dariush, and I am under the employ of one of the Wise Men – a very respectable job – for there are only three in the entire Persian empire who have the ability to truly see the stars and to understand their meaning; to understand the future, the past and to have the gods speak to us, through the shining stars of night.

So one particular evening – my home is over here just a few blocks away, from where the Wise Men’s place is – and he ran and knocked on my door and I came outside, which wasn’t too surprising, because every time the stars move in their constellation and things change, and the planets line up, he comes excitedly to my door. But this day was different. This day he pointed out something truly shocking – something that kept him from having full understanding – and that alone was shocking.

He understood that this light was shining and it was shining down upon the west – and we didn’t know what it was – and it scared me that he wouldn’t have any sense of understanding. And yet, and yet, there was an excitement amidst that fear, because here was the Wise Man believing and telling me that this was an exciting moment. For God must surely be blessing each one of us with a transformational moment – otherwise this light would not be shining. It was just not right. It didn’t fit within the Heavens that he knew, and so, we can only imagine what God must be trying to say.

He called for his horseman – his currier – to come and get on that horse, and to ride as fast as he could to find the other two Wise Men, who were in another part of Persia. In the meantime, before it was even light, we started gathering what needed to be gathered. We gathered water, we gathered food, and we gathered animals, camels, anything to help us on this incredibly long journey. Then we gathered a militia and we gathered gold. We met with the King of Persia and asked for the resources – financially – to help us on the journey, and we gathered it as quickly as we could. What seemed like an overnight in the midst of our bustle, but probably took a couple of weeks, the other two Wise Men and their entourage came and met with us, and the very next morning we started our journey.

It trickled down, hearing what the three Wise Men said to the rest of us, that they wanted to hurry as fast as they could, because they were not sure how much longer this light would shine, and they didn’t want to miss what God was attempting to tell the world; because the entire known world could see that light and they didn’t want to miss it at all – but I was scared to death.

Imagine what it must have been like, and what we had to endure, because the distance from where we were to where we thought that light was shining – Jerusalem – was 1, 225 miles. That is a long way in a car. [Laughter.] But we were on camels. We were going slowly because we had to bring an entire entourage and we were scared to death, because we were going through a desert with its own problems – its own animals, its own creatures. We had to go through the desert into places we didn’t know. We had to carry gold with us, because in every new land we came into, we often had to meet with the king, or the leader, or the

ruler, of that particular area and ask permission; and, often times, we had to provide income, gold or jewels, for permission to pass through their land unharmed.

As we went, soon the word would get out that we were people with means – that we had the gold and the jewels and whatever else necessary – we would have to face bandits. That is why the entourage was so important; to have the men who would fight our battles for us and keep the robbers at bay.

But, imagine how big that must have been, to have three Wise Men – the people who cared for them – the cooks, the support and the military who came with to protect. Hour after hour, day after day, the drudgingly slow process with the three Wise Men, frightened to death that the light would turn off, and all would be for naught. The investment of time, the investment of energy, the investment of dollars – enormous amounts of wealth went into this trip – and if the light went out, where would we be?

But somehow, in some way, we made it to where the light seemed to be shining. But, you get to a certain point, a certain place, and the light shining from the heavens doesn't land in one particular spot. It's a wave, it's a wash in a large area. and we were not sure where that landed us.

The last part of our journey was the most frightening, because we were from the Persian Empire, which was often at odds with the Roman Empire; and, we had to go to Jerusalem to meet its local king to ask permission to go onto their land. There was no guarantee that they would allow it, or that we would even make it safely back home.

We went in humbly. The rest of the entourage stayed. They put down their arms. They stood around the camels and the wealth. Just three Wise Men, and their support – one person each. I stood next to my Wise Man and two others stood next to theirs.

The six of us went in and we met with the king. When we saw him he seemed kind of smarmy – like a used camel salesman. [Laughter.] We couldn't quite put our finger on it, but I heard my Wise Man whisper to another one, "Take him at face value."

They told the story of what they had seen and why they had made the investment of the time and the income, and the energy to travel so far, and Herod – this King – asked us, "Why we would take such risks?"

We explained about the star. He acknowledged that he, too, had seen it, but didn't think much of it. When we explained that this we believed – or the Wise Men believed – that this was not just a happenstance in the sky, but was actually something spoken from God, he brought in his own people: First, the Roman gods – their priests – who didn't know anything about why it was in the sky.

So Herod then explained to us that there was a group of people called "the Jews," who also had their own form of religion, and their belief in one God, which was not dissimilar to our own, because Zoroastrian – which is another form of religion with the belief in a single God, a single deity – and so we were curious. So Herod kind of shrugged his shoulders, and he called on their priests of the Romans to go talk to the priests of the Jews, and their leaders came in.

One of them took out the scroll, rolled it out, and said from Micah 5:2, “*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*”

Now, where was Judah? They explained that Judah was just south of Jerusalem and we said, “That seemed to make sense, because the light seemed to be shining the brightest just south of where we were.” They explained that Bethlehem was not even a day’s journey, not even a half a day’s journey – that even by walking slowly you could get there in an hour and forty-seven minutes.

And, so they asked – the Wise men asked Herod – Herod thought for a moment, and I heard one of the Wise Men whisper to another, “We need to be careful, because they are talking about a ruler over Israel, and perhaps this ruler won’t think kindly of that ruler.”

But after a moment of thought, Herod gave us the OK. We thought, “How odd. How odd that their *own* leaders – their *own* religious people – both Jew and Roman – none of them even thought to go, or even to come with us. How strange!

Herod simply asked us that, if we go, “That we would report back so that he, too, could worship him.” I thought to myself and didn’t verbalize it, “If my three Wise Men would travel 1, 225 miles to sit down and kneel before this possible King, that the Jews speak of, could not Herod walk, ride or otherwise, less than half a day to find this King himself? But not....”

So, we gathered and, in what seemed like nothing, after going so far, we were there. We were in Bethlehem and we saw the light more bright – almost blinding – in one particular spot, or one particular hovel. It was blinding. We knew, in both feeling and sharpness, that this is where that light was shining. And very carefully – almost fearfully – but with such pent-up excitement, the three of them, and the three of their guardians, walked up and knocked ever so slightly on the door.

Now, here is where your understanding and my story diverge. First, I keep saying Wise Men, and there was a reason for that. They were not kings (loved the hymn you sang, but it isn’t right), they were not Kings; they were Wise Men. They were, as I have said, astrologers – astronomers who understood the sky and used this understanding of the sky to give us an expression of the spiritual, of religion, of communion with God.

They weren’t kings. In some ways, they were more important than that. Something else. In most Christian understandings, they believed that they were going to a Holiday Inn, 2000 years ago, that had a barn in the back. That is not true, either. When I said we were going to knock on a door I meant it. We were knocking on the door of house.

Even now, when scholars and archeologists have gone back to the Jerusalem that I experienced 2000 years ago, and you experience today; all over Bethlehem, there were these small hovels – small homes – and they had three levels. On the main level, there was this area that was filled with hay. Now, these were very poor people. If they were fortunate enough to have a few animals – a cow, maybe a couple of sheep – at night they would bring them in and let them stay inside. That way they wouldn’t be *stolen* and they would produce

enough heat in the winter time – because the desert gets cold at night – to provide a little warmth.

On that level up one step, about this height (Scott holds his hand up about three feet from the chancel floor) from the floor, would be the main area – up just enough that the cows and the sheep wouldn't hop up. And, right in front of this, there two little oval holes where the cows and the sheep could come up in the manger and eat and drink. It was easier for the people, because they would not have to go down that step to provide feed and water for their animals, but they were safely inside. That was the manger.

The main floor, right up here (Scott motions up), was where the family lived, slept, ate and experienced life – all in one room. Now if the family was blessed – because they all had flat roofs – they would build another room – an upper room – on top, and that is where they would have family gather who were visiting and even more so, provide income that when travelers were coming through, they would let someone stay in that space.

So, on this particular night when the Wise Men knocked on the door and we went in, the place was a-hum. Not only were there people in the upper room – already there – but, here was a family of the owner of the home.

Now you might say, “Wait a minute. It says in the Bible, ‘innkeeper.’” But in the original Greek, there is in different places in the Bible – both in the Old Testament and the New Testament – there are two words: One in the Greek, which means “innkeeper,” and the other means “home owner.” In this particular place, it doesn't say “innkeeper.” The Greek word means “home owner.” It was just a mistranslation that was easier to share in a hymn. And, I get to the reason why that is so important in just a moment.

We went in – and there was the child, the mother and the father. At first we didn't move, because we were so in shock, and then we realized and fell to our knees, because we had met with so many earthly kings – one just hours before – who were arrogant, who were demanding, who were greedy and wanted our gold – who were manipulative and we even feared for our lives.

But the light from Heaven shined down and allowed us to take the veil of this world away. It allowed us to see with the eyes of faith – and we saw that this King, this King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, was humble enough to be born in the stable section of the home – amidst very poor people – the women of whom probably helped deliver this baby, because they were in the same four walls. And this child – this God – was willing to be vulnerable and poor, and humble enough to be treated so *modestly*, so, well – the opposite of arrogant, the opposite of greedy, the opposite of what every other king ever experienced.

And, it is in that humility that we fell on our knees and we worshiped this God. We brought gold, we brought the frankincense, we brought the myrrh, and then we realized, if Jesus had been born in a barn in the back, he wouldn't have been intimately involved in the birth – the very humbling, very real, very physical birth – with the humble family who let them in.

Every part of the birth of Jesus was done in the humble, human way, including the women of the house there to assist. And then, when the shepherds came and went, it reinforced the lowliness and the humanity of this King. But, even worse, it is one thing for shepherds, who

were Jewish, as lowly as they were, to come in and see the Christ child in that moment; but to let in Gentiles? What this means is that this humble, lowly King wasn't just King of the Jews. This was the King of the entire world, and the entire universe, and we knew this was our King as well. And that light that shined may have shined most brightly on Jerusalem and Bethlehem, but it shined its light all over this world and around the Heavens.

And so, you have to choose. We all worship something. Some of us worship money. Some of us worship rulers – earthly rulers. But you have the opportunity, like we did, to fall on your knees and to worship one who wants to be with us, who is never too high and mighty to be in our midst – who will forgive us, heal us, and sustain us for all times. The choice is yours, and I hope you can see the light like we did that night.

Amen.