Sunday, January 9, 1983
THE WISDOM OF THE WISE MEN
Matthew 2:1-12

Last Thursday, January 6, has for centuries been known on the Christian calendar as Epiphany, or the beginning of the Epiphany season. Years ago, in the church it was a more important holiday than Christmas itself. More recently however it has been known as the day which officially closes the Christmas cycle — the 12th day of Christmas, although for most of us the Christmas cycle closes much earlier because we start much earlier.

And that's too bad because the season of Epiphany has an important meaning which must not be lost. Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ, God's entrance into our world as a human being, but Epiphany carries this event one step further. It commemorates the fact that even though Christ was born in Bethlehem of Jewish parents; he came as Savior for the whole world, for all peoples and all nations.

To put it another way, Christmas by itself has a purely local setting, a small town, a stable, peasant parents, a baby born to fulfill a long line of Hebrew prophecy and to be the glory of his people Israel. Only a few local shepherds in the hills near Bethlehem are told of his birth.

And that's the way it is for many of us today. Our Christmas celebrations are for the most part local family affairs. We have our traditions, our customs, and we don't think very much beyond them.

But now comes Epiphany, particularly as it is connected with the visit of the Wise Men from another country, and this takes Christ out of a purely local setting. The Wise Men symbolize all nations everywhere; they are people who are not of Hebrew heritage — people who do not know of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And the light of the star, which the Wise Men followed, shines over the whole world, not just Palestine. Christ is the light of the world.

Thus, Epiphany calls us from our Christmas celebrations, from our local family affairs to proclaim that Jesus shall reign where the sun does its successive journeys run.

Epiphany reminds us that God's love is for all people everywhere and is not the private property of any one group, race, church or nation. God's love is shockingly indiscriminate. The Wise Men's visit is a foretelling of the future of the Christian gospel.

This is all part of the meaning of Epiphany in general, but now let's look more specifically at the Wise Men and their wisdom. Why were these individuals called "wise?"

1. Note first that they had wisdom because they were seekers and searchers. They did not think they knew all there is to know. For them there was always more truth to be sought. For them learning and searching was a lifelong process.

Furthermore, their wisdom lay in the fact that they were willing to look beyond their own culture, their own religion, their own understanding. The search for truth is always a journey in itself. They also know that we human beings have to go beyond ourselves in our search.

And so, they studied the stars and the heavens. They pursued truth in every direction they could find. No doubt they also sensed that the old religions, even their own was not adequate.

They must've felt as the Psalmist who wrote — "When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established, what is man that thou art mindful of him?" Mystery, deep mystery lay all around them. They were not like a man I once met who had never left his village and far from feeling impoverished, he derided people who scurry over the face of the earth. There was not much to see, he hinted, and almost nothing to learn.

Mystery, deep mystery, but he would have none of it. On the other hand it is said that when Charles William Beebe, the great naturalist, visited his friend Theodore Roosevelt, that the two of them would often after an evening of discussion about the issues of life, go out onto the lawn to look at the stars and they had an amusing little ceremony in which they engaged — they would search until they found with or without binoculars, the faint, heavenly spot of light-mist beyond the lower left-hand corner of the great square of Pegasus, and then one or the other of them would recite: That is the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda; it is as large as our Milky Way; it is one of a hundred million galaxies; it is 750,000 light years away; it consists of one hundred billions suns, each larger than our own sun.

Then after an interval, Roosevelt would grin and say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."

Wisdom is in knowing the limits of our knowledge, and in that sense the wise men were wise. They looked beyond this world, beyond human beings and could not help but sense the majesty of God. Their searching and studying the stars symbolized all this. Wisdom is also in knowing that there is always more truth yet to be found. We never know all there is to know about anything.

Wisdom is knowing that we never know all there is to know about God. We are on a continual pilgrimage in our religious knowledge and growth.

2. Secondly, note the wisdom of the Wise Men in discovering new truth while doing what they were always going — while at their usual work. From what little we know of these individuals, they had been studying the stars, the universe for years on end. They studied painstakingly and systematically and kept at it. They didn't rush around from one thing to another, looking first here and then somewhere else and giving up quickly if nothing new was discovered. After watching and studying the sky for years, they one night discovered a new star they hadn't seen before.

Wisdom and knowledge are most often gained through painstaking, systematic work, through the process of patiently keeping at it. There are no shortcuts to wisdom.

All of us are seekers and knowledge gatherers in our own fashion. Yet so often instead of settling down and daily, painstakingly and systematically pursuing some subject and keeping at it for a time, we usually try first this and then something else in a sort of hit or miss fashion and then we are disappointed when nothing worthwhile seems to happen. We fail to see any new stars because we give up looking too quickly.

Just as some of us want to learn to play the piano in ten easy lessons, we want to learn to pray or deepen our spiritual lives simply by learning a few new techniques. But things don't often happen that quickly.

To change the analogy — any good athlete knows that physical conditioning and training takes time and discipline — one must keep at it on a regular basis. The same is true in spiritual

conditioning. And there are times when it will seem that nothing is happening and then the only solution is to keep at it.

It's what we call "follow through." Someone once compared follow through and lack of follow through to different kinds of music. This individual said that although he knew little about music, it seemed to him that the different between the best of the old music or what we call classic, and so much of the new music was that some of the new music never seems to believe in anything enough so that it thinks it worthwhile to say it again. It picks up a theme and drops it. It never follows through with anything. It lacks sustained convictions. It is filled with discontinuities.

But when one hears a magnificent symphony by Tchaikovsky or Beethoven, or Mozart, there are convictions so profoundly believed that the music goes through with them to the very end. One says to oneself, "surely that theme has been stated as beautifully as ever it can be stated." Yet that theme returns again and again, elevated and resplendent beyond our dreams. Then again one says to oneself, "now surely all the possibilities have been exhausted and lo, at last the theme marches back once more into the music glorious like a parade with banners."

In a similar way the wisdom of the wise men was demonstrated in their power to see it through; to be diligent, patient and systematic at their work and in their search. This is in itself a message for us for this new year; the fact that we need not only starting power but staying power; and then one day we will see the star we have searched and waited for so long. The secret of the spiritual life is to keep at it in a disciplined, expectant and open-minded manner.

I came across this revealing definition of prayer and the spiritual life in my reading this past week — "Prayer is the regular and continuing re-orientation of the self to the ultimate source of wholeness and healing, regeneration and spiritual growth at depths within and beyond the self. Prayer is a disciplined openness of the self to the power that works in us."

3. There is one more way in which the wisdom of the wise men can be an example for us. Once they had seen the star and had given themselves to following it, they acted with a kind of abandon — that is, they took the journey and followed the star, not knowing for sure where it would lead. It was a journey of faith.

I like to imagine that the wise men had a colleague who was not so wise and thus decided not to make the journey with them when invited. He wrote a letter stating his reasons to them for not joining in the journey.

My Dear Balthazar: Thank you for your invitation. I regret that I will be unable to accompany you on your journey due to pressing matters which make it imperative that I be here in Mi-Rut.

Your invitation could not have come at a more awkward time for me. I have just had my house done over and I must see that the rugs are arranged properly. It has all been very expensive and leaves me short of cash with which to make the journey, not to mention buying gifts for this new king of whom you speak.

I do not understand why you do not put off the whole project until spring when traveling will be much easier. When I think of those long hours on camel back, I shiver for you, my dear Balthazar.

You mentioned the star, how it enchants you just to look at it and how it seems to beckon you on. Really Balthazar, for a person who has studied the stars all his life, you seem to be acting in a juvenile fashion. Of course, I agree with you that the stars when properly studied, may reveal the secrets to some of the mysteries, but life is complicated, and each problem solved seems to open up a greater mystery. I must confess I am rather tired of mysteries.

When I received your letter, I did look at the star, I grant that it did seem rather extraordinary, but certainly not worth following at any great distance. Of course, I admit that my eyes were rather tired at the time. I have been going to a lot of parties and staying up late, so I haven't had too much time for stargazing lately. Otherwise, I'm sure that I could have explained the phenomenon to your complete satisfaction without your having to follow the star at all.

I have given you some of the reasons why I cannot go with you, yet I must confess that I am not sure that I have given you the real reason. Life is complicated and, in these days, it is difficult to know what to believe. Would that we lived in the old days when life was simpler! Sometimes I wonder which side I am on in the everlasting battle between light and darkness. But such introspective questions profit little. Please write if you find anything of value. Otherwise, I conclude that we remain in darkness.

Signed — Allez Inarush

The Gospel of Matthew reports — "And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was...and they rejoiced with exceeding great joy and going into the house they saw the child with Mary and his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him."

Here is the ultimate wisdom of the wise men — when they found love of God expressed in a human being, they worshipped. May we also do the same.