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Homily Given on January 3, 1999
The Epiphany of the Lord

The gospel of the curious astrologers and their quest for the king led by a star seems centuries removed and worlds away. Yet in at least one very important aspect of the story of the Magi and their journey is the story of all of us gathered here today. They were pilgrims; we are pilgrims. They were seekers; we are seekers. The Magi journeyed without knowing where the star would take them. Our life pilgrimage is often taken into the shadowy, unknown, and unpredictable future. They search for Jesus Christ; we, too, each in our own way are looking, searching, groping with only faith and hope to guide us for the place where we will meet Jesus, the newborn Lord.

On their journey, the Magi ran into numerous obstacles. Herod pretended to befriend them, smiled on their arrival, and welcomed them. Yet he was a treacherous, manipulative devil who, in the long run, was anything but a friend. Have we not met his like on our own journey? In all good faith, the Magi listened to the sages and religious leaders in Jerusalem. They represented the collective wisdom of the ages. Yet they were not in the least bit interested in the Magi's quest. They mouthed the accepted formulas. Yet they made not a move to accompany the seekers, journey with them, or even make their pilgrim road easier. Have we not met their like on our own journey?

Two aspects of the astrologers' quest strike me as particularly similar to our own. Let me examine each briefly for us today.

First, the Magi were particularly single-minded and single-hearted in their quest for the Lord. But oddly enough, their journey was neither straight toward the goal nor smooth and easy. We don't know how many they were. Tradition and legend, not the Scripture, number them as three and name them Gaspar, Balthazar and Melchior. A far more modern narrative tells of a fourth seeker and names him Artaban. This one set out with three gifts: a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl for the newborn king.

On his way with the others, Artaban stopped to care for a sick traveler. Because of his concern, he was delayed and missed the rendezvous with his companions. So he had to sell the sapphire to purchase camels and provisions to journey on his own.

Artaban, too, reached Bethlehem but, again he was too late. Soldiers were ravaging the land, carrying out Herod's order to slay every male child. In the kindness of his heart, Artaban was moved by the misery of parents. He took out the ruby, his second gift, and bribed the Captain and saved the children of the village where he stayed. On he wandered with a heavy heart.

Years went by, and Artaban found himself in Jerusalem. Hearing of the one who was the Messiah, he hurried toward the hill of Calvary to sell his pearl and buy the life of this Jesus sentenced to crucifixion. En route, his path crossed that of a miserable young woman being sold into slavery. With only a slight hesitation, Artaban gave the pearl in exchange for her freedom. His last gift was gone.

The last scene has Artaban the seeker under the cross of Jesus. Heartbroken that he can now do nothing, he hears instead wondrous words:

Do not be sad, Artaban. You have been helping me for many years.

When I was sick you cared for me. When I was in danger you sheltered me. When I was oppressed you freed me.

Did Artaban find Christ? Not at the end alone, but on the journey. In the poor and lonely, in the sick and needy. The gospel assures us today that if we journey well, Jesus is with us not only at the end, but on the way.

A second aspect to conclude. The Magi met the Lord, Matthew tells us, and returned "by another way". When you and I, like the Magi, meet the Lord Jesus on our journey, it often takes surprising and unexpected turns. What we anticipated as burdensome and difficult turns out to be life-giving and inspiring. What we feared and anticipated in dread, instead is easy, even wonderful. It is the nature of a journey of faith to be full of surprises, twists, and turns. Robert Frost summed up the Magi pilgrimage and our life journey in faith:

Two roads diverged in a wood and I

I took the one less traveled by

And it has made all the difference.

There is where your journey and that of the Magi meet. They took a different road following a star. You take a different road, searching for Christ, listening to the gospel, traveling in faith. For both of us, it makes a great deal of difference. For both of us, it leads to a meeting with Christ the Lord.