

"Our Manifest Destiny: It's In the Star"

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[texts: Is. 60:1-6/Eph. 3:2-3,5-6/Mt. 2:1-12]

"We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."

What is it about stars that has such a hold on humans? From earliest days humanity has gazed heavenward and been mesmerized by these points of light which are so far away, but seem oh so close. Every major civilization has speculated that these lights must have some sort of influence on life. Egyptian hieroglyphs, Babylonian ziggurats, Chinese calendars, Persian, Greek and Roman writings all testify to human destiny being tied-up with the stars.

Even today people look to the stars for some sort of determination of how their lives are going to turn out. How many people look at the horoscope in the daily paper -- even though they may say, "I don't take it seriously, it's just for fun." How many heed the incessant 'infomercials' and take advantage of a 'psychic friend'? And at this time of year, how many will read, with at least passing interest, if not humor, Jeanne Dixon's or another "famous seer's" published predictions for the coming year. People look despite modern astronomy taking the place of astrology and the knowledge we now have that these heavenly bodies are not spiritual entities. Why?

Because we want to know our destiny.

One of the threads running through human history is our desire to know how things are going to turn out. We want to know what meaning, what purpose our lives will have. It is this search for meaning that sets us apart from the rest of the created world. For humanity mere existence, getting-by from day-to-day is simply not enough. And one thing quickly recognized is that where just existing becomes the norm, we see the decline of humanity.

In short, we have at the root of our being a deep desire to count for something, to make a difference. We have the words, "I was born for greater things" written all over us. It's what makes us human.

It's not a very great jump from the desire individuals have to know their destiny to that of the destiny of a people. This, too, can be traced throughout the scope of human history. We Americans, however, seem to latch onto the notion of our peculiar destiny more than just about any people. Having a purpose and a mission is one of the great formative notions of the American identity.

That sense of destiny can be traced from the Pilgrims' "errand into the wilderness," through the revolution, to the articulation that we have a "manifest destiny" to populate the continent "from sea to shining sea," and beyond. Scholars like historian James Oliver Robertson in his book American Myth American Reality and sociologist Robert Bellah, who first identified the phenomenon of "civil religion" in America and analyzes it in Habits of the Heart, chronicle the search for our American destiny. It's a search, I fear, that has become increasingly difficult over the last forty years. Yet, it goes on.

While the quest for meaning is itself meaningful, it's a pale substitute for the real thing. The truth is, sooner or later all these searches have failed. Whole lifetimes have been spent in the pursuit and at the end they are left with, "Is that all there is?" Why?

Because they were looking for the wrong thing.

That humanity can ask questions about meaning and purpose comes from the divine image imprinted upon us. We have, as Blaise Pascal put it, been made with a "God-shaped void" and we search for something to fill it. Be it stars or a sense of national purpose, they don't fit a space which only God can fill. Augustine -- who also searched for his destiny -- said it so beautifully in his Confessions, "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in You, O God."

We can run after stars, or theories, or the cures for AIDS, cancer, or the common cold and none of them will ever give us the sense of meaning, of destiny achieved that we long for. Our greatest light is no better than darkness and day is half-night until we come to know our true destiny.

Listen, again, to Augustine:

"Too late came I to love, thee, O thou Beauty both so ancient and so fresh, yea too late came I to love thee. And behold, thou wert within me, and I out of myself, where I made search for thee: I ugly rushed headlong upon those beautiful things thou hast made. Thou indeed wert with me; but I was not with thee: these beauties kept me far enough from thee: even

those, which unless they were in thee, should not be at all. Thou calledst and criedst out unto me, yea thou even breakest open my deafness: thou discoveredst thy beams and shinedst unto me and didst chase away my blindness: thou didst most fragrantly blow upon me, and I drew in my breath and I pant after thee; I tasted thee, and now do hunger and thirst after thee; thou didst touch me, and I even burn again to enjoy thy peace.” [Confessions book 10, ch. 27]

Our destiny is made manifest in the star. God’s light shines forth in humanity’s darkness and the Magi who come are those foretold by Isaiah: “Nations shall walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance.” But the star is not the light, as John Chrysostom preached in the fourth century, “Is it to be wondered at that a divine star ministers to the rising Sun of Righteousness? It halts above the head of the child as if saying, “This is he.” The star points to the one who can fill the void in humanity’s collective heart and can give meaning and purpose to those engaged in the most menial of tasks. God has invited us to share his life and took our flesh so that we might have the means to share that life. He has restored our true humanity and given us new dignity -- it’s not something we should take lightly.

You see, the Magi are us. These “wise men three” are representative of the three races: Semite , Black , and Indo-Germanic; which tradition has descending from Noah’s sons Shem, Ham and Japheth. Their names, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar come from still later sources, and legend has it that they are buried in the cathedral at Cologne, Germany. Nevertheless, they’re us. We Gentiles, pagans, outsiders lost in the darkness and out of the light of the Law of Israel have been included. This is God’s secret plan Paul tells the Ephesians, that the “Gentiles are now co-heirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the Gospel.” The great irony of this story is that God’s own wise men, the priests, scribes and pharisees don’t recognize the Messiah, but the Gentile Magi do.

There’s a lesson for us here. We who think we have the light better be sure that we do. In other words, we need to recognize the darkness in our lives -- the attempts we make to have things or actions, or even people other than Christ be our destiny -- and come afresh to the light. No one else will fill the void, but he.

I think Peter Chrysologus, who wrote in the fifth century, can sum it all up for us:

“In choosing to be born for us, God chose to be known by us. He therefore reveals himself in this way, in order this this great sacrament of his love may not be an occasion for us of great misunderstanding.

Today the magi find, crying in a manger, the one they have followed as he shone in the sky. Today the magi see clearly, in swaddling clothes, the one they have long awaited as he lay hidden among the stars.

Today the magi gaze in deep wonder at what they see: heaven on earth, earth in heaven, humanity in God, God in humanity, one whom the whole universe cannot contain now enclosed in a tiny body. As they look, they believe, and do not question, as their symbolic gifts bear witness: incense for god, gold for a king, myrrh for one who is to die. . .”

Our manifest destiny is in the star, we need to follow it , to be servants, as best we can, of the grace that invites us all to find Christ.