

When You Follow a Star and Find a Stable
Matthew 3:13-17
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My wife, Brenda, and I were looking for a place to pitch our tent. We were vacationing in the magnificent San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado. We'd seen billboards advertising Sunshine Campgroup near the town of Ouray. They promised stunning mountain vistas, modern electrical hookups, and secluded campsites tucked away in the woods. It sounded fabulous. We drove to the gate and paid our \$10.

Now, the fact that we didn't see any other vehicles in the campground should have been a tip off. Something was definitely amiss. A farmer dressed in bib overalls appeared and took us to our campsite. It was in a pasture out behind the barn. Evidently if we were going to pitch a tent, we'd have to avoid the cow pies. The only trees we saw were some old dead stumps that the cows used to scratch their backs. The only electrical hookup was a long extension chord coming out from the barn.

If truth be told, I'd seen one too many scary movies in my day. My imagination soon got carried away. I started picturing the headlines: *Tourists Done in by Berserk Farmer. Unsuspecting Campers Lost among Killer Cow Pies.* After ten minutes or so, we were so creeped-out by the place that we packed up and left without even asking for our money back. It wasn't at all what we were expecting.

Some wise men from Persia set out on the trip of a lifetime. They are probably stargazers by trade, people who search the heavens for signs of important events. The latest celestial phenomenon points to a new king. It seems almost too good to be true, but off they go on their grand adventure. They pack up their camels and spend weeks, if not months, chasing the star. It leads them all the way to Jerusalem, to the palace of the great King Herod. They ask Herod, "Where is the child who's been born king of the Jews?" Herod is stunned. King? He doesn't know anything about a king—*he* is the king! Herod immediately checks with his advisors. They tell of an ancient prophecy of a king to be born in the town of Bethlehem. That's not far from Jerusalem. The wise men have just a few miles to go.

Do you ever wonder what it was like for them as they came riding into Bethlehem? I mean, what happens when you've been chasing a star for oh-so-many months...and it leads you to a stable? And there, instead of finding a regal palace and a majestic king sitting on a throne, you find a helpless little baby cradled in his mother's arms. The Bible doesn't say what the wise men were thinking, but I can imagine them being more than a little disappointed. It wasn't at all what they were expecting.

Every one of us has had times in life when we've followed a star...only to wind up in a stable. A college graduate has a diploma tucked under her arm. She's ready to take on the world. But the only job she can find is waiting tables at the local hamburger joint. A man and woman stand before the altar full of promise. But a few years later, their marriage is in trouble and neither one wants to go to counseling. A man looks forward to retirement. A couple of months after getting his gold watch, he starts having chest pains. The doctor diagnoses him with congestive heart failure. All these people thought they were following a star, but when they got there, it felt more like a stable.

So what do you do? What do you do when your destination is not all you hoped it would be? The response of the wise men gives us some clues.

The first thing the wise men do when finding a stable is look for God. Wise men and women of every age, when faced with a difficult situation, try not to panic. They hold steady and say, "God is somewhere in the midst of this, I just know it. There's something I can learn here. There's a way I can grow."

We see this scenario over and over again in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. He winds up in Egypt, suffering one misfortune after another. God finally hears his prayers. God raises him up to be a leader in charge of food supplies during a severe famine.

Well, guess who shows up? Joseph's brothers. They're looking for something to eat. When Joseph sees them, he's so overcome with emotion that he begins to weep. He reveals himself to them. Suddenly their eyes get very wide. They fall to their knees and beg for forgiveness. Of all the things Joseph could say to them, the one thing he does say is this: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." Without a doubt, Joseph—like wise men and women of every generation—has the ability to look for God in the midst of a stable.

A second response of the wise men: *when they find the stable, they offer their very best to God*. They approach the Christ child and present their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh—gifts fit for a king. I wonder, given the shoddiness of the setting, did they have any inclination to hold back? Maybe.

You know the feeling. The campground, the job, the team, the friendship, the marriage—they aren't all we hope them to be. All of a sudden we're thinking, "Maybe I'll just hold back." We begin to withdraw. We hide our feelings. We don't try. And what happens? Things slowly start to unravel. In the long run, we have to be able to give our heart and soul to the things we value, or they're probably not going to work.

Somebody once said that the difference between an "average" and an "above-average" person lies in three little words: *and then some*. Above-average people give their best, and then some. They do the job, and then some. They work through their problems, and then some. Whether it's teaching or accounting, at home or on the job, one of the marks of a Christian is to be willing to put our lives on the line for Jesus Christ. Wise men and women of every generation offer their very best to God.

A third response of the wise men: *when they find the stable, they are willing to change directions*. They are warned in a dream about Herod's devious schemes, so they change their plans and head home by another way. That's risky business. The king has expressly ordered them to return and give him a full report. But God has something else in mind. The journey home will take them in a new direction.

So, has anything like that ever happened to you? You're following a star and instead find a stable. What do you do next? Do you let disappointment eat away at your happiness? Do you get caught up in frustration? Anger? Bitterness? Or, do you allow God to shape you and mold you into a new kind of person? Do you allow God to bring about real change in your life? Wise men and women of every generation are open to the changes that God has in store for them.

A century ago Henry David Thoreau left the hustle and bustle of modern society in search of a more contemplative life. He found it at Walden Pond. One day Thoreau got the bright idea of wading into the pond and sinking down until the water was at eye level. Why? Because he wanted to be able to see the world through the eyes of a frog. According to Thoreau, it gave him a whole new perspective on frogs.

This is something like the story of Christmas. Almighty God—with all the power and glory in the universe—allows himself to be born in a cattle shed. God comes down to our level. It's as if God wants a whole new perspective on the human race. In reality, though, *we* are the ones who get the new perspective. For we're able to see the amazing, far-reaching, never-ending love of God like never before.

Here's the truth: If we go looking for God, we can search the stars all we want, but we're more likely to find God in a stable. When we get to the stable, we might be a little disappointed. It won't necessarily be what we were expecting. But still, we bring the best we have to offer and we lay it before the Christ Child. As we worship him, God begins to change us. A little at a time, God changes our attitude. God changes the desire of our hearts. God changes even the direction of our lives. And gradually, we become the wise men and women that God want us to be. AMEN