

Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on January 4, 2009
Epiphany of the Lord
Liturgical Year B

Today's Gospel is a favorite part of the Christmas story. That's easy to figure out. The Christ-child receives Christmas presents. These wise men – Magi – are extra colorful characters. Our own nativity set has its camels and Magi with gifts. We love to sing "We Three Kings" even though the Gospel doesn't say how many there were.

This year, let's focus on the part of the story after the Magi visit Jerusalem and King Herod. You recall Herod's words to them: "When you have found the child, bring me word".

So our Magi – wise men – set out from Jerusalem. The story reads: "They set out, and there ahead of them went the star they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was."

What kind of place was it? It wasn't, in all probability, the stable where Jesus was born. Keep in mind that Joseph and Mary had travelled to Bethlehem only for a census. Some students of the Gospel tell us that by now Mary and Joseph are back in Nazareth. The star comes to rest over a house. It's probably Joseph's house in Nazareth. That's fascinating. The wise men had come to find a child who was born a king. So logically they went first to a capital city – Jerusalem – to the palace. But Jesus, we're told, wasn't in a capital or a palace. He was in a small remote village in a carpenter's house. By today's standards, we couldn't get an occupancy permit. No electricity. Outdoor plumbing. A dirt floor. No glass in the few windows. Surely not the place to look for a king. Were the wise men disappointed?

There's something here about your life and mine. Most of us have followed one star or another in life. Maybe we thought our star would stop over a palace...only to have it stop over a very ordinary house. As a wry friend of mine once reflected: "When my ship came in, I was at the railroad station."

I've talked to friends who followed the retirement star. "Won't it be great when I'm retired!" In fact, most retired people are happy. But it's not in a palace – not today. Most retirees have to pinch a penny. Some have to go back to work.

Remember the stars we followed when we were twenty or thirty? We'd set the world on fire. But even the most successful people's stars settle in places that leave them incomplete and wondering. A very successful writer, four million copies sold, told us: "After the initial excitement passes, life goes on, just as bewildering as it was before. The great problems of life and death are there, just as they were before."

So what to do when the star settles in unexpected places? We can learn from the Magi. They could have looked at Joseph's house and said, "This can't be it," but they didn't. The Gospel says they were filled with joy.

They understood. They were willing to assume that God had a plan. So might we. Look at where the star rests for you. There's probably a lot waiting for you even if it's not where you planned to be.

For those who trust God, the star won't likely lead to a palace. It will always, however, lead to a place where we can love God, find Christ, and receive love in return. For that today, let us give thanks to the Lord our God.