

## Seeing Stars

How exactly did God use a star to lead the Magi? Did God create a new star from nothing? Did God bring two stars or planets together to make it look extra bright? Or did something else happen? These questions point to crucial questions about our own relationship with God. How does God communicate to us? Does he send us signs and, if so, how? How do we discern God's will in our lives?

Discernment of God's will is an enormous topic of which many books have been written. There isn't an official Church teaching on the questions posed above, but I would like to share with you my personal opinions based on my prayer life, on my experience of leading others through discernment and on my own study of Theology and spirituality.

I believe that most of the signs that we get from God are not "sent" from God in that moment. Rather, God uses what is already there—the "stuff" of the earth (stars, flowers, etc.) and the events of our lives (dreams, pandemics, etc.)—to let us know of his will. It's perfectly OK for us to pray, "God send me a sign," but it is even more helpful to pray, "God send me sight." All of the signs that we need to follow God's will are already embedded in creation and in the events of our lives. The problem is not that we are lacking signs but rather that we are lacking sight. We are lacking the vision to recognize God's messages to us that are already existing in our lives. The Wise Magi are called wise because they looked at exactly the same sky as everyone else and yet they saw—written in the stars—the path to Christ. If we are lacking something as we discern God's will, it isn't signs but rather the ability to read the signs that are already there.

This is where prayer enters in. We pray, not in order to get God to do something like send us a sign but rather to have God transform our perception of reality. In prayer we become attuned to God's action that is already happening in the world and in our lives. Saint Ignatius Loyola says,

*...God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, He conducts Himself as one who labors. Thus, in the heavens, the elements, the plants, the fruits, the cattle, etc., (Puhl Translation)*

All the time, God is laboring through the elements of the earth and through the events of our own lives. He is laboring to communicate His will to us. I have always been amused by the fact that Ignatius used cattle as one of his examples. Imagine I am walking through a pasture and asking God for a sign in regards to an important decision that I have to make. Just as I am making this request to God, a cow nearby bellows out a loud *Moo*. If this were to happen to me, I would not believe that God had momentarily possessed the poor cow and forced her to speak to me. But I would believe that God

might be using the cow (“laboring through the cow” Ignatius would say) to say something to me. The cow’s *moo* is her own, but God might use it as a vehicle—a carrier—of His word to me. How would I know? How can I be sure it isn’t simply my imagination? I will have to pray some more about it. I will ask God to help me sort through it all. There are no shortcuts. And this is why the distinction between God sending signs and God using signs that are already there is an important one. Many a Christian have made terrible mistakes because they wrongly assumed that God had sent a sign through one particular experience. Our chances of discerning well improve considerably if we not put too much weight on one occurrence but rather that we slowly and thoroughly pray through all of the happenings of our lives, not looking for a shortcut but taking the long slow journey of the Wise, following a star but also asking questions along the way, “Where is the newborn king?” (Matthew 2:2)

Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ