

Maybe the greatest greeting card I ever received came from my best friend to my brand new address in Chicago.

Knowing that I had just accepted the call to serve at Resurrection as a stranger in a strange land, he was sending his encouragement, and he chose a favorite card that he had been saving for a while, for just the right occasion.

On the front is the simple drawing of a rocket ship with a lit fuse pointed toward a distant star. Strapped with rope to the outside of the rocket is a man, not looking very safe, which is captured by the caption, "Danger be damned."

My friend repeated and elaborated this in the closing line of his remarks, after something far too kind about admiring my courage, writing in his own hand words that could be the motto for the magi: *Danger be damned. On toward the star!*

I can scarcely guess what kind of odyssey these mysterious travelers from the east embarked upon to chase down the child whose birth lit up the sky, but I don't imagine it could have been very safe.

It seems more likely fraught with danger, and not only from the usual troubles of ancient travel, from vanishing provisions to roadside robbers and other dishonest strangers with foreign customs and cultures and tongues.

Sometimes the biggest danger posed is not from others but from self.

The fellow strapped to the outside of the rocket ship seems at best brave, but more likely several paces across that fine line into stupid.

I don't know much about space travel, but I believe it's wiser to be inside the spacecraft when it launches.

The star seems a lot brighter than the guy chasing it...and frankly, that is true in this gospel story as well.

It is ironic that we have come to call our Epiphany travel cohort "the wise men," because they don't seem very wise at all.

The word for them in Greek is *magi*, from which we get the word *magic*, and that is what they probably practiced.

Think tarot cards and séances, crystal balls and zodiac charts...the smoky disciplines of bizarre spirituality long on shady reputation and short on reliability.

Surely there are among the magi legitimate and trustworthy practitioners, but the profession has by its mysterious nature so much room for the shenanigans of charlatans that its credibility is sketchy at best.

One certainly doesn't in any case get the impression of personalities that are very practical; even if they are on the up and up, are star chasers really the kind of people you want making your day to day travel arrangements?

Certainly the Bible doesn't trust those who practice the magical arts; the Torah condemns them and so do early Christian leaders in the book of Acts.

Magic be damned, yet these magi travel as heroes in Matthew's story, on towards the star. Somehow, without losing their wallets, they make it all the way to Jerusalem...where they promptly demonstrate how not wise they really are.

In search of the King of the Jews, they go to the Roman figurehead's palace.

As Frederick Buechner observes, *The foolishness of the wise is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than by the way the three Magi went to Herod the Great, King of the Jews, to find out the whereabouts of the holy child who had just been born King of the Jews to supplant him.*

*It did not even strike them as suspicious when Herod asked them to be sure to let him know when they found him so he could hurry on down to pay his respects.* (Peculiar Treasures, p. 55)

Even though the magi stopped for directions, the star kept moving, which thankfully is what the grace of God does for all of us despite our regular pit-stops from paying attention.

Finding the politicians unhelpful (imagine!), the magi once again settle for divine leadership and return to following the star, which directs them to a young child in anything but a palace.

*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy,* writes Matthew, and you have to wonder whether it was because they had found the child or just because the blessed thing finally stopped moving, and by now they were exhausted and completely sick of each other.

*On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.*

*Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts* that every young child needs.

If you think certain Republican presidential hopefuls are out of touch, go shopping with magi for baby shower gifts sometime.

Wise men indeed.

They should have left these treasures back at Herod's place; at least he would appreciate them a lot more than the magi appreciate how different this young *King of the Jews* is from run of the mill royalty.

Only the myrrh will prove useful, as a burial spice, because the business card printed *King of the Jews* will appear only at the child's death, over his thorn-crowned head as he dies on a cross, an emperor with no clothes.

Even the wisest of the wise cannot predict or comprehend this, the strange way that God saves our dangerous and unwise world.

Yet for all of their foibles and foolishness, from the outset as Gentile magicians who are by definition damned to their various gaffes along the way, these magi do find Jesus.

They worship him, and bring him their awkward gifts, and he accepts them.

That is the good news that we celebrate not because it happened long ago under a star in a galaxy far, far away but because it continues to happen.

In a dangerous world full of threatened politicians and violent machinations, we who fancy ourselves far wiser than we really are continue to make our precarious journeys in search of something unspeakably sacred and we end up here, in the humble house of Jesus, with our worship and our gifts and our joy.

Somehow we find him, not what we expect him to be, apparently much less, and truly much more.

We find him because somehow, God finds a way to get through to us, even though it takes God more effort to reach us than the serious effort it takes us to reach God.

For the magi, with their heads foggy with frankincense, God uses a star, some Scripture, and finally even a dream to move them forward by another road.

For us, our own heads cloudy with confusion and distraction and worry and fear, God uses water, nature, some Scripture, bread, wine, strangers, friends, companions we are sick of,

anything and everything God can use to get through to us to nudge us toward Christ and to turn us around so that we too can make it home.

We pay attention as best we can, but we do get waylaid and distracted.

We look for love in all the wrong places, and we seek God's presence in power and politics and wealth and glory and any number of shiny blind alleys.

And there is along our winding way danger.

Indeed, the gospel writers would teach us if we dare to listen closely, it is not our detours that bring the danger, but our closest following.

The star leads the magi to the nervous jurisdiction of a murderous king.

The one who hung that star leads the child to speak truth to power, and to die on a cross.

He it is that summons us to take up our cross and follow him, to stand with the vulnerable, to shun excess and embrace the needy neighbor, to hold out against the self-promoting values and violence of the status quo and to kneel down, in worship and in service and in solidarity with the broken and beaten down.

If we are not at least in some trouble as followers of Christ, then we have probably lost sight of our star.

The starlight of Christmas is really the spark on the fuse of a rickety rocket ship, pointed at earth, with God strapped to the outside, intent on reaching us.

And somehow God makes it here, and promises that we will make it there, too, if we dare to chase after this child and strap ourselves to Him.

This Christian journey we make is impractical, precarious, and perilous, but it is also wildly thrilling and more than worth it, and it will lead us to overwhelming joy.

Danger be damned.

On toward the star.