

Stargazers: Finding and Following the Twinkling Eye of God
Lisa Fortini-Campbell
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Do you have a bucket list—a list of things you want to do before you die? I don't have one per se, but someday I would like to see the night sky the way the Magi saw it. From our vantage point here in Chicago, we can see a delightful sprinkling of stars on a clear night, but people I know who've had the chance to travel far out into the desert or sail across the ocean tell me that without the interference of city lights, the night sky looks white, like a vast blanket of twinkling snow overhead. I'll bet that's exactly the way it looked to the Magi 2000 years ago.

In that vast expanse of whiteness, something unusual caught their eyes. I've always assumed they noticed the Christmas star because it was astonishingly bright. But when I went back to the Gospel of Matthew to re-read the story, I discovered that he doesn't mention the star's brightness at all. Instead, he says the Magi noticed it because it was a new star and because it was behaving oddly. It was moving.

The Magi believed new stars heralded the birth of kings, and so they packed up their gifts and set out to find him. *“And suddenly the star they had seen rising went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage.”*

And this is all we know about them. They saw a star. They followed the star. And at the end of their journey, they found the Christ.

Isn't this what we hope for—that we, too, will meet God face to face in the end? And so, like the Magi, perhaps all we need to do is watch for the twinkling star of God in our own lives, set out on our journey of faith, and follow where he leads.

But, while Matthew gives us the beginning and the end of the Magi's story, I find the part I really want to know more about is the part he completely leaves out—what their journey was like.

We know nothing about their journey except that it took them “over field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star,” at least according to the Christmas carol. But was it smooth and easy or fraught with obstacles and hardship? Did they ever wander off the path or did they make a beeline straight for Bethlehem? Did they ever get scared or discouraged or nostalgic for home? Or did they get impatient, the way we all did when I was a kid as soon as the car pulled out of the driveway: “Are we there yet?”

We have no idea. The only thing we know for sure is that in the end they didn't get lost.

I don't want to get lost on my journey home to God either. I need a little guidance. What I want is a good journey story.

Fortunately for me and for all of us, we have the grandest journey story ever told—Exodus—and we can learn everything we need to know about the walk home to God from the trials and tribulations of the Israelites' 40-year sojourn to the Promised Land. The Book of Numbers calls it 40 years of “wandering in the desert,” but they weren't wandering because they were without a “star” to follow. On the contrary, they had Moses to guide them every step of the way and more than that, they had God Himself at their vanguard, leading them forward in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Nevertheless, as you know, not five minutes out of town, all hell broke loose.

To be fair, some of their anxiety came from life-threatening hunger, thirst, disease and war. But what intrigues me most is how easily a tendency to spiritual weakness caused them to go right off the rails. That's the weakness in myself I worry most about.

For example, when they saw the Egyptians hot on their heels at the edge of the Red Sea, they got scared and lost confidence in Moses—What have you done to us, they cried. *“Far better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”* Better to live as slaves than die in freedom? What could they have been thinking?

Then safe on the other side of the sea, God fed them manna from Heaven so that they wouldn't be hungry. But in short order they got bored with the same food day after day and whined that they ate better back in Egypt...again, as slaves. And then, of course, when Moses left them to climb Mt. Sinai and receive the Laws from God's own hand, off they went, quick as you like, to make a Golden Calf to dance around. The minute Moses was out of sight, God was out of mind.

The Exodus story makes me realize how easily we humans take our eyes off the prize God has promised us and when we do, how fast we mess up. Just like when we're driving: it's so tempting to take our eyes off the road to peek at what's up on our phones or send just one quick, little text. But that glance can cost us our lives.

When I was a little kid prone to distractedness, my mother kept me safe as we crossed a busy street with a simple command: “Hold my hand! Hold my hand!” In a not dissimilar way, Christ keeps us safe on our journey of life—a journey filled with distraction—with an equally simple command: “Remain in me! Remain in me!”

Because it is very simply said, but not so simply done, Christ tells us exactly what to do to remain in him. *“If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love... This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.”*

Love one another as I love you.

Christ taught us how to do just that by his own example and also in his many sayings, sermons and parables. One of those parables used a traveler to teach an important lesson. It started with the words:

“A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead.”

Other travelers saw him and passed him by. A Samaritan, however, did not. The Samaritan bandaged the man, paid for his care and promised to pay more on his return. And then, having saved another man’s life, he continued on his journey.

If only it were so easy.

Back in 1973, two psychology professors teaching at Princeton, proved just how hard this act of self-giving love is in a little experiment they called, “From Jerusalem to Jericho,” after the road the Samaritan traveled.

To set the stage for the experiment, the two professors, John Darley and Daniel Batson, went to Princeton’s Theological Seminary and asked if the seminarians would be interested in participating in a research study. Those who were went, one at a time, to a classroom where they were instructed to prepare a short sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When they were finished, they were told to make their way to a different building where they would have a chance to tape-record their talk.

The real purpose of the research, though, was to learn how outside pressures like you and I face every single day, affect a person’s ability to act consistently with his values. To test the effect of these pressures, they gave each seminarian one of the following three instructions as soon as he had finished writing his sermon.

One-third of the seminarians was told, "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We'd better get moving. The assistant should be waiting for you so you'd better hurry." A lot of pressure.

Another third was told, "The assistant is ready for you, so please go right over." A little pressure.

The last third was told, "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn't be long." No pressure at all.

Each seminarian set out by himself. On the way to the office building, the experimenters arranged it so that he would encounter an actor lying in a doorway, doubled over, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The researchers wanted to know: Would the seminarian stop to help?

This study became famous, because sadly, not a lot of them did. When they weren't rushed at all, 63% of the seminarians stopped and offered some kind of help. If they were under a little time pressure, that number dropped to 45%, and if they were in a big hurry, only 10% of them even paused. In fact, a few of these frantic seminarians literally stepped over the apparently injured man to get to the room to tape-record his speech on the good Samaritan!

So, what are we to make of these results? Of course, some people might be tempted to focus on the on the irony, if not the outright hypocrisy, of these godly young men just having written about the Good Samaritan, then failing to practice what they were about to preach! But, recognizing the demanding, overloaded, and pressured conditions in which our own journeys take place, perhaps we have a little more compassion for their failures.

Just like those seminarians, our endless tasks, all demanding our immediate attention, crowd out our ability to stick to our priorities and we're often left struggling just to get through the day. We can't do what we want to do. We can't do what we're meant to do. We can't do what God calls us to do because.....well, because there's too much to do!

The solution? Do less.

We hear this advice a lot, particularly in Advent, as many priests, trying hard to help us, use their homilies to urge us not to get caught up in the holiday frenzy, to slow down, reduce the number of our activities and leave time for God.

It's good advice.

But now let me take you back to the study. Remember the seminarians who weren't rushed at all, the ones who had as much time as they wanted to get across campus? Yes, 60% of them stopped. But that means 40% of them didn't. What was *their* problem?

Pope Francis would call it a failure of vigilance.

In one of his daily Masses a few years ago, he taught the congregation: "The Christian is a man or a woman who knows to keep watch over his or her heart. And many times, our hearts, and with so many things that come and go, seem a local market: everything, you can find everything there. This is why vigilance is necessary. Do I test what I think, what I want, what I desire or do I accept it all without discernment?"

The Pope is suggesting that our failure to remain in Christ isn't just not having enough time. It has to do with letting something pull our eyes off him. We get distracted and stop focusing on his "star." And having failed to be vigilant, we go completely off the rails—just like those Israelites out in the desert.

This kind of vigilance is hard—as I learned to my cost.

Last summer, I signed up for an exercise class in downtown Evanston. I hate exercise. I do it only because the consequences of not doing it are worse. But, I dislike it so much that I have a bad habit of waiting to leave the house for class until the last possible moment and usually arrive at class just in the nick of time.

That day last summer was no different. I was running late. Thank goodness, I found a parking spot, parallel parked in one try, fed the meter, and started hurrying down Church Street.

As I rushed along, I saw a man sitting on a bench on the sidewalk and his leg was bleeding. He had his pants leg rolled up and was holding paper towels against his calf. The towels were soaked with blood. There was blood spattered on the sidewalk, too. The odd thing was that he made no sound. He didn't call out. He didn't seem to be in either distress or in pain. So, what did I do?

I was in a hurry, yes, but I did notice him. I saw there was a problem and it occurred to me to be concerned, but the fact that he wasn't crying out for help gave me an easy excuse to disregard my responsibility to stop and at least offer to help. I stopped being vigilant, I took my eye off the Lord and...

I walked right by him.

But, thanks be to God, not two steps farther along, I came to my senses, "Lisa! What *is* the matter with you?!" So, I rushed into the exercise studio, told them I'd be late for class, grabbed some paper towels and ran back to the man. There was blood everywhere and his legs were covered with sores.

Pressing more towels against his legs I asked him if he wanted me to call an ambulance and he nodded. I told him I'd wait with him until it came. And while we waited, I thought about Paul, *Saint Paul*, called by Christ, unparalleled in his theological understanding, zealous in his preaching, a better disciple than I will ever be, and yet the man who moaned in his letter to the Romans, "*What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate!*" "*The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.*"

I know how he felt.

That experience taught me what I'm sure his own failures taught him—that no matter how committed I am to a Christian life, I'm still weak as water.

The ambulance didn't take long, and as the paramedics organized their supplies, he said to me, "What is your name?" When I told him he said, "God bless you, Lisa. You are a good person. Thank you for helping me."

I am glad I did help him. I'm glad I didn't fail to do the right thing and so be left to reproach myself for the failure. But, goodness, the whole experience made me realize how difficult it is to get through this journey of life without wandering off in the desert. Constant vigilance is hard for one little person to manage all on her own.

But I have been encouraged during these first few weeks of Advent hearing Isaiah tell me how profoundly God wants to help all of us. Isaiah says: *"I, the LORD, your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go."* I will *"strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak."*

That makes me very happy. And I'm grateful that God has left me his words in Scripture to instruct me and made his Word Incarnate to show me. But still, I need more. It would be really nice to have someone right beside me saying, "Hold my hand! Hold my hand!"

But I realized that there are such hands to hold one day when Fr. Joe happened to say, "Every good example is the word of God communicated."

He was talking about the people we meet on our journey whose lives embody the lessons of self-giving love Christ worked so hard to teach. In them, God has made his words flesh and so they can hold my hand. In them, I can see the twinkling of his star. In them, I can hear his words of encouragement. From them, I can learn specific lessons that keep me on the path. And always, in them, I can find the inspiration to stay on the path and walk on.

God has given you such good people, too, I'm sure of it. So, in the hopes of jogging you to think about them, I'd like to tell you about four of mine.

The first is a woman I don't know by name, although I see her every week when I visit my hospice patient at her convent.

Like all places that cater to the elderly, the convent has hand railings that run along the length of every corridor for the residents to hold on to. One day, from the far end of the hallway, I saw a very elderly Sister, dressed in her habit, bent completely over with osteoporosis, facing the wall, one hand on the railing, standing completely still.

Immediately, I was worried. Was she ill? Did she need help? So, I started to walk more quickly towards her. But at that moment, she moved one step to the left and stopped again. I was still concerned, but at least I could see that she was able to move.

When I finally reached her, I turned to look at the wall she was facing and realized it displayed the Stations of the Cross and she was praying at the 4th one—where Jesus meets his mother, Mary.

It's hard to describe what I felt at that moment—abject humility, a rush of admiration, but more than anything else, a spontaneous eagerness to be more faithful in my own prayer. Hers is the hand I hold as I work to stay firmly focused on God.

My second example is a person I met just last Tuesday. Her name is Lisa, too, and she and her husband have five children between the ages of 11 and 18. For the last year, she has also been her father-in-law's full-time caregiver. He has just entered hospice and now I'll visit him every week to give him a little extra company.

When Lisa answered the door to greet me, her pretty face was lit up with kindness, gentleness, and welcome. We spent some time getting to know each other and I learned that this good Christian woman and her husband agreed that she would put aside the home-schooling she'd been doing for her children since they were small and enroll them in public school so that she could focus more completely on the care of her father-in-law in the home stretch of his life.

Lisa is like a modern-day Ruth and she is giving her life just like Ruth did for her mother-in-law, Naomi, *"Whither thou goest, there also will I go, and whither thou lodgest there also will I lodge. Thy land be my land and thy God be my God."* Lisa's is the hand I hold as I work to persevere in a life of self-giving service to the people God has asked me to care for.

My third example is one that may surprise you—Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary. Whatever you think of the President, please let us set that aside and agree that this woman has one tough job. At every press conference she faces a hostile audience. Then on the weekends the comics take over and ridicule the weight, makeup and even the pie making skills of this young mother of three.

But every week she's back at work and is unflappable. Even more than that, this woman working in our government in a visible, public, media role, is openly, proudly, magnificently a Christian. She refers often to Christ and to her faith as she answers questions from the press corps, but last summer she amazed me in her response to a reporter who was pressing her hard about one of the President's cruder tweets.

The reporter said, "You've been talking about the idea that the president is a fighter. So I would ask this to you sort of on a personal level. You have stood here and talked about your family from this podium. Are you going to tell your kids this behavior is okay?"

Without taking even a moment to gather her thoughts she replied, "Look, I've been asked before when it comes to role models -- as a person of faith, I think we all have one perfect role model, and when I'm asked that question I point to God, I point to my faith, and that's where I would tell my kids to look. None of us is perfect, and certainly there's only one that is, and that's where I would -- point that direction."

When Christ said, *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house,"* I think he meant someone like Sarah and so hers is the hand I hold as I step forward to more bravely proclaim my faith.

My last story is about my friend, Brad's, 12-year-old sons.

Brad and his wife, Laura, have three children—Katy, the eldest and Jack and Luke, twin boys. Jack and Luke are gifted athletes and have been since they were very little and so you can imagine that much of the family's life has always revolved around the boys' sports schedule. Except for church. In this family, God comes first and attendance at church every Saturday evening and as a family is inviolate.

But, Katy's senior year in high school made them reconsider. Senior year would mean a lot of social activities for Katy on Saturday nights—proms, parties, and dates—and she would have to miss them all if the family continued its Saturday night church tradition. No one in the family wanted her to miss the fun of her senior year so they all sat down to discuss what to do.

They agreed that during this special year for Katy the family would go to church instead on Sunday mornings, still worshipping together as they had committed to do, but leaving Saturday nights free for Katy to enjoy her senior year.

Then the coach moved the boys' football practice from Saturday morning to Sunday morning.

Jack and Luke were star players ready to be promoted to the middle school's "varsity" team. They adored football and now with practice on Sunday morning, they couldn't both play the sport they loved and worship the God they adored.

Eager to solve this problem, Brad went into high gear. He went to the coach to ask him to change the practice day back to Saturday morning but the answer was no. So, he asked him to move it to Sunday afternoon to keep the mornings free. Again, the answer was no. So, he told the coach that he wanted to keep Jack and Luke on the junior varsity team because it would still be practicing on Saturdays. The coach said no because now that the boys were older and bigger, it wouldn't be fair to the younger players on the team. Brad even went to another middle school in the district to see if his boys could join their team which practiced on Saturday mornings. The answer was no.

So with the heaviest of hearts, Brad brought his family together for another conference. He explained the dilemma to them all. "Boys, we have a conflict and I can't resolve it. One of our family's most important values is to worship together as a family. We agreed that we would all go to church on Sunday and give Katy the special gift of Saturday evenings to be with her friends for her senior year. Now your coach has moved varsity practice to Sunday morning. I have done everything I possibly could to ask the coach to move practice or to find some other way to keep you playing, but there is none. It is now your decision, boys, what should we do? What do you want to do?"

Brad told me that he watched a storm of emotions sweep over his sons' faces—surprise, dismay, disappointment, confusion, agitation and distress. The boys looked at each other and started to whimper then to cry.

If you were the parent of these two young athletes, what would you do?

Perhaps Brad could take the boys to church on Saturday nights and then Laura could take Katy, separately, on Sunday morning. Or perhaps Brad and Laura could take both boys on Saturday and let Katy go on her own on Sunday. Or maybe everybody could go on Saturday night as usual except when Katy absolutely had to be at an event, and then she could just skip church that week. Or maybe during this one crazy football season, the whole family could skip church rather than deal with this scheduling nightmare. But all of those solutions meant trading off family worship for sports.

What do you think they should do?

Just before the feast of Christ the King in November, two of our daily readings came from the Book of Maccabees and they tell us about a time when the Jews hung on to their faith, even at the risk of their lives. Probably the most famous story is the one of the mother who watched her seven sons die, one by one, rather than give into the king's command to eat defiled meat. But the story that never fails to touch my heart is the one about 90-year-old Eleazar who was also sentenced to death for refusing to eat the meat, but in his case, and because of his age, even his own torturers begged him just to pretend to eat the meat and save himself.

But Eleazar wouldn't.

He said, *"Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will prove myself worthy of my old age, and I will leave to the young a noble example of how to die willingly and generously for the revered and holy laws."*

It is just as Fr. Joe said, every good example *is* the word of God communicated.

So, what did Brad's boys do? Tears running down their faces, Jack and Luke looked at each other and then back at their mom, dad and sister. Jack spoke for them both. "Daddy, we go to church!"

These boys have the hands I hold so that I do not waver in faith. They are the hands that help me lift my head and keep my eyes on the vastness of God's plan. These are the hands that help me to trust that he has a small and absolutely necessary place for me if only I will make him the most important value in my life. Two twelve-year-old boys.

If you're as old as I am, you may remember that the leaders of the Civil Rights movement adopted an old Gospel song as one of its themes. You can go on YouTube and hear Mavis Staples sing it. The words are, "Hold on. Hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize! Hold on."

That's what Luke and Jack, Sarah Sanders and daughter-in-law, Lisa, and the elderly praying Sister, show me how to do. We are all holding hands as we wend our way home to God—one foot in front of the other, firm on the path.

So, as the Christmas star approaches its final destination over a manger in Bethlehem a week from Monday, I hope that like me, you, too, will make a place in your prayers for these very special people in your lives who help you keep your eyes on the prize and who hold on to your hands.