

Epiphany: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

by [Laura Sumner Truax](#) in the [December 25, 2013](#) issue

I was talking with a young woman who had left our church a few years earlier and remembered that she had celebrated her birthday recently. "Happy Birthday!" I said, but she seemed confused. I realized I had crossed that invisible line that divides friends from mere acquaintances. Only your good friends know when your birthday is coming. So how did I know the date? There was no reason. Well, no reason except one: Facebook.

Although we were no longer part of each other's real lives, the woman and I were still connected on Facebook. In a creepy sense I had information about her. It was discomfoting.

"What do you know? How do you know it?" are the questions that loom over the Magi text.

It's wild and wonderful that the diviners from the East are the first ones to know the good news. Their craft predated Moses and had been handed down from the ancient Sumerians as early as 3500 BC (Jews and Christians regarded their arts as deceptive, even dangerous).

How did they know what they knew? The Magi gathered their information not from ancient texts but from the natural phenomena around them. They determined that something was going on from how the stars moved and the heavens changed.

It was a process of trial and error, of adjusting and readjusting, of being willing to go in a different direction because of the unfolding information of the heavens. The celestial tapestry didn't bring forth its wisdom with Google-like specificity. The wise men's two-year or so journey was probably full of wrong turns, detours and plenty of monotonous days.

Sometimes we think that it will be easier for us. As a child I was told that God had a wonderful plan for my life and wanted to let me in on every detail. I'd be told what job to take and at what salary, what car to buy and what church to attend. Down to the smallest details of our existence, I was to consult the Lord. It was like a divine

Facebook page set up before the foundation of the world.

It took me a long time to shake off the myth. Not that God wasn't concerned with the details of my life, but a lot was being left up to me. I was responsible for reading the landscape and making some conclusions and decisions. Using the tools I had and with the broad understanding of what Jesus desired for the world and for me, I simply had to start moving.

How many of us get stuck or discouraged because we think we're going to get more information than the Magi had? These travelers were not afraid to find they were off course but asked for directions, sought clarification and adjusted their routes in response to new information. This was all part of the journey, an inevitable aspect of traveling by the stars.

Likewise, at first blush it's tempting to see the light shining through the Isaiah text as a million-lumen lighthouse, but in reality the true light of which Isaiah speaks came into the darkness, into the world, and "the world did not recognize him" (John 1:10).

Perhaps this light begins as small as a mustard seed or starts as unnoticed as leaven. Perhaps it's a glistening in a dark corner that catches your eye, not becoming clear until you stop and focus on it. But if you take it out, put it on the lampstand and add a few more candles, you have a world aflame with God's glory. Nations will flock to see it.

I suspect that the light of God that Isaiah knew wasn't the blinding light of a World War II landing pad, but a light of invitation so warm and inviting that people of all cultures determine to journey toward it. Using their tools and information, they, like the Magi from the East, make their way to the King of Kings.

The Magi are traveling companions for us in our information-rich age and especially good for us to emulate as we put one year to bed and once again hold out hope for the new one. Our plans may seem set, but just as 2013 took many of us in a different direction, so will 2014. Our job prospects may fall through or our relationships fall apart. Most of us may will end the year in a different place than we expected.

Likewise, some of us know a lot of random information about God—bits and pieces—but lack the lived experience of God that the Magi knew. We know enough

to blurt out happy birthday, but we don't know much about the rich complexity of life with God.

This is the first Sunday of a new year. Once again, the star is rising in the East. With the knowledge we do have and the traveling companions that we've been given, let's set out and follow.