

“Those Who Dream Persevere”  
Matthew 2:1-12

In 2020, there was a contest for naming the next Mars rover and a young man from Virginia by the name of Alexander Mather won by naming it “Perseverance.” This word captured the imagination of the deciding committee because they knew that rover’s mission to Mars was going to face challenges, but perseverance will help them overcome the obstacles and make new discoveries. Here is how Alexander talked about this: <https://youtu.be/NA64dzkk20Y>.

Perseverance is not always a word we like to experience because it means that we have to endure something difficult. Yet, any dream worth achieving requires perseverance. Even God has to persevere in loving us. One of the words that is often used in the Psalms about God’s love is “Steadfast.” In today’s scripture about the story of the coming of the Magi to visit baby Jesus in Bethlehem, we hear about their perseverance. They had to travel from afar relying on ancient prophecies and their ability to read the stars. Then when their search hit a major bump, they had to search again. When they encountered Herod and did not find the baby they were looking for, they persevered in their prayer and in their listening to divine guidance.

The Magi had to rely on hunches, stars, and prophecies and those were not exact instructions like we normally get from a GPS. What is worse is that their faith seemed to have led them straight into a major problem! Faith led them to Herod, a power-hungry and unethical king. He was not afraid to sacrifice anything and anyone for the sake of keeping his power. He even killed his sons when they seemed to threaten his throne. He was also willing to sacrifice little children when the Magi did not go back to him. The Magi had to rely on their dreams and prayers to find a way out of the mess with Herod. They persevered in the face of uncertainty and fear. They adapted their plans and were willing to find a different way to the Christ child and back to their own homes. Their perseverance was not blind determination. It was tempered with a willingness to change and to adapt while holding on to their vision. Maybe if they had followed the star more accurately, they would not have been ready to receive the humble birth of Jesus. Maybe they would have missed the whole thing! The detour might have been necessary for their conversion.

Because from our human perspective, it is often hard for us to fully appreciate God’s humility and willingness to love. It is so easy for us as human beings to misunderstand the signs that God sends us. In their book *A Surprising God*, Thomas Long and Donyelle McCray talk about Harriet Powers, ‘a nineteenth-century African American quilter [who] took an unusual approach in one of her quilts. She depicted biblical scenes in which divine signs were misinterpreted or ignored: Noah’s neighbors scoff at him instead of joining him in the ark, Jonah refuses the assignment in Nineveh and finds himself in the belly of a whale, and a heavenly dove descends on Christ -a sign of humanity flouts in the crucifixion...Powers included additional quilt panels that recounts scenes from more recent history. These include atmospheric events that were believed to indicate divine judgment, like the eerie darkness that persisted throughout the day on May 19, 1780 (later attributed to pollution) and a meteor shower that prompted waves of terror in 1846. She

also dedicated a quilt panel to November 13, 1833, a night when falling stars dotted the horizon. Maybe God hoped a sky full of falling stars would inspire awe, but cows and horses screamed in terror, birds screeched, and dogs panicked and ran in circles. And humans? They thought the world was coming to an end. Rather than a moment of beauty, the falling stars were interpreted as a sign of judgment."

Faith does not give us simple answers or exact locations. We may even completely misinterpret signs from God. The invitation is to stay open to new inspiration.

Staying open to new inspiration and guidance was key for the Wise Men that even when they missed the place of the birth of Jesus, they found him eventually. Human discernment is not always easy or clear. There are many ways to listen to God's will.

Two of my favorite examples of discernment are from St. Francis and St. Ignatius. There is a story about St. Francis of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (image) and how he discerned God's will. "One day as they started out together, Brother Masseo walked a short distance ahead of Saint Francis on the road. But when they arrived at a three-way crossroads where he could head either toward Siena, Florence or Arezzo, Brother Masseo said: 'Father, which way should we take?' The saint replied: 'Let's take the way that God wills.' Brother Masseo replied: 'How will we be able to know the Lord's will?' The saint answered: "By a sign that I'll show you. So, by merit of holy obedience I command that right in the crossroads where your feet are standing, you twirl around in a circle, as children do, and don't stop twirling until I tell you.' After Brother Masseo was twirling rapidly, Saint Francis said: 'Stand still. Don't move!' And he stopped suddenly, Saint Francis said: 'What direction are you facing?' Brother Masseo replied: 'Towards Siena.' Then Saint Francis said: 'That's the way God wants us to go.'" (Francis of Assisi The Prophet Early Documents Volume III,p 461)

The other method of discernment comes from St. Ignatius (16<sup>th</sup> century). He developed a set of rules (about 22) to help people pay attention to God's will. The steps involve paying attention to interior feelings of consolation or desolation over a period of time. There are many ways to practice discernment, but the key to all of them is paying attention to your own soul and how God speaks to you. It is all about your intention of listening to God and allowing God to show you the way over time. Whether you twirl or contemplate, persevering by letting your intention of listening to God's will is what will guide you at the end of the day. The invitation is to persevere because eventually and through grace we find our way. We get disoriented, lose our way, misinterpret signs, project our own fears on God, but eventually we find our way. The dream of God never dies within us as long as we keep two principles alive: 1. Humility: Staying humble enough to know that sometimes we get things wrong and let fear guide us. 2. Prayer: When our prayer life is honest, intentional, and faithful we eventually find our way.

We will end by praying a familiar prayer. It is called the serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr:

God grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.  
Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
As it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right  
If I surrender to His Will;  
That I may be reasonably happy in this life  
And supremely happy with Him  
Forever in the next. Amen.