

STAR OF WONDER

Numbers 24:17-19

Revelation 22:16-17

Matthew 2:1-15

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SCRIPTURE

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near— a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites. ¹⁸ Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. ¹⁹ One out of Jacob shall rule, and destroy the survivors of Ir” (Numbers 24:17-19 NRSV).

“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” ¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift (Revelation 22:16-17 NRSV).

PROLOGUE TO THIRD READING

Tomorrow is Epiphany. The word Epiphany means "a shining forth" and we associate it with the Star of Bethlehem which led the Magi (the Wise Men) to the infant Jesus.

Christmas is the celebration of the birth (nativity) of Jesus Christ. We do not know the date of Jesus' birth. Many scholars believe January 6 to be the earliest documented date for celebrating the birth of Christ. The 4th century Bishop Epiphanius of Cyprus said that January 6 is Christ's "Birthday, that is, His Epiphany." Later in history the Western Church adopted December 25 as a special day to celebrate the Nativity of Christ and the Eastern Church soon followed. However, millions of Christians around the world prefer to emphasize January 6. Christmas, therefore, refers not only to the specific day, "December 25", but to a festival lasting 12 days, culminating in Epiphany (January 6).

But the historical account is even more astonishing if we realize that these people (the Magi) should not have been there in the first place. For these were outsiders with lives that were different and homes that were distant. Herod had not invited them. He spoke to them only after he learned they had arrived. The Romans had not invited them. The religious leaders certainly had not invited them. Not even Mary and Joseph had asked

them to come. But God had invited them and God continues to invite others even to this day.

SCRIPTURE

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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 of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Matthew 2:1-15 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Some people like to go star-gazing. I am not talking about Hollywood celebrities, although some people like to do that, as well. Rather, I am talking about the stars in the night sky. We see the stars in the sky as tiny, sparkling, far-distant lights or, if we are away from city lights, as a vast glittering carpet of light that fills the sky.

Those tiny sparkling lights are not really so tiny at all. For the sake of comparing the stars

in size, imagine that our earth was the size of a quarter. On that same scale of size, the nearest star, our sun, would be 9 feet across. But our sun is just an average star. The star Antares would be 6,984 feet across, or the width of five Empire State Buildings lined up end to end. Antares would not fit in our sanctuary. The star Betelguese, on that same scale, would be 10,000 feet across, big enough to swallow our sun and Antares.

Yet all of these immense, flaming giants were created by God's command. Genesis tells of their creation with nearly an offhand, "oh, by the way," remark:

"And God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars" (Genesis 1:16).

The psalms give us a more up close and personal account of the stars' creation:

"[God] determines the number of stars; and gives to all of them their names" (Psalms 147:4).

The God and Creator, who created the mighty stars and named them all, called those same stars into his service. God used the stars to announce and illustrate his purposes as the story of our salvation unfolded through history.

Through our spiritual forebears Abraham and Sarah, God promised to bless all people on earth. God would cause a great nation to arise from their descendants, and through that family line all families of the earth would be blessed. Even though Abraham had no children, not even one, God said to him:

"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them ... So shall your offspring be. And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:5-6).

Out of the countless multitude of Abraham and Sarah's descendants, one particular shining star, the true Star of Wonder, would arise. This "Star of Wonder" would be a person and not an object. I realize that in the popular Christmas and Epiphany song, "We Three Kings," the star of wonder is the light in the sky that led the Magi to Bethlehem. And that is fine. But if you think about it, the real Star of Wonder is the One before whom they knelt and gave their gifts.

Going back to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, we know the family line grew into a great nation. The Israelites, though once enslaved in Egypt, were set free by God and led on their way to the Promised Land. During their travel through the wilderness, God,

speaking through the prophet Balaam, told his people of a rising star still to come. Even though the king of Moab hired Balaam to curse the people of Israel, God would not permit him to do that – instead of cursing Israel, Balaam blessed them. Balaam spoke of a star to rise out of Israel:

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near— a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17).

At some point in the future, a rising star, a scepter-wielding king, would arise in Israel and crush the enemies of God's people.

When the time was right, God sent that promised king, that blessing to the nations, into the world. We know this blessing as Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem. God used a star to announce the birth. Philosopher priests from Persia, called “Magi,” studied the stars and may have been familiar with the words of the prophet Balaam about a rising star and a scepter-wielding king in Israel. They saw the special star and went to look for the child, the promised heaven-sent Ruler.

By the way, “We Three Kings” can be a bit misleading on this matter. The Magi were not royalty.¹ They may have advised kings but were not rulers themselves. They were scholars – hence the alternative term “Wise Men.” We also do not know how many there were. There were three different types of gifts (gold, incense, and myrrh) and some assume from that there were three magi. But an early tradition says there were twelve.

Anyway, they went to Jerusalem to find the *new* King, only to find there a very unhappy *old* king, Herod, who was deeply concerned about this possible newborn threat to his throne. After consulting with the Temple priests and the Scriptures, the Magi set off again, once more led by that star, to find the new King. The star led them to Bethlehem, as the Scriptures had foretold, and there they found the true King, the King of kings. They worshiped him and offered him rich gifts and returned to their home. The promised star, the promised King, had arisen in Bethlehem.

The words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled in the birth of that rising star, the Star of Wonder:

¹ Although Christians had begun by the 2nd century to speak of these visitors from eastern countries (Matthew 2:1–12) as “kings,” perhaps because of passages like Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:3, it is more accurate to think of them as magi or astrologers, the scholars of their day (from the hymnal, *Glory to God*).

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:1-3).

God, the Creator of the stars, took on human flesh and was born in Bethlehem. Jesus, the Son of God and son of Mary, grew to teach and preach and heal. When the right time came, he was crucified for the sins of the world, for our sins. On a very dark day, when the light of our star, our sun, faded for a time into darkness, Jesus took onto himself the penalty that we deserved. But on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, proving to be exactly who he said he was, the Son of God, the descendant of Abraham and Sarah, the blessing to the nations. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus' name, we have the blessings of forgiveness, restored purpose, and eternal life.

The crucified and risen Lord, speaking to his apostle John, described himself as a star. Jesus said:

"I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star"
(Revelation 22:16).

What we call the morning star is actually the planet Venus, which appears both as the evening star at sunset and as the "morning star" to signal the approaching sunrise. Jesus is the bright Morning Star. His arrival is a sign for us, a sign of approaching daylight. His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension are the sign that we are living in what Scripture calls the last days, the time before our Lord Jesus will return in glory, glory that will outshine the rising sun.

Before his return on the Last Day, the mighty, created stars that for so long ruled the night "will fall from the sky" (Matthew 24:29). Jesus' return will be the dawning of the new and eternal day when we will live in the Lord's presence forever. On that day, those who have died in Christ will be raised from their graves, transformed and glorified. Those who are still living at his return will also be transformed, with heavenly glory that the apostle Paul compares to the glory of the stars:

"There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory" (1 Corinthians 15:40-41).

We will live forever in the presence of God, where our most familiar star, our sun, will no longer be needed. Scripture says of the saints in glory:

"They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5).

Until that bright and shining day, we have some shining of our own to do. Jesus called us "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). Our light, our shining faith, cannot be hidden but must shine out to the world through our words and our actions. We are to tell others the good news of Jesus, the bright Morning Star, who came to give his life for this sin-darkened world. As shining lights, the Holy Spirit will work through our shining witness to the Gospel to turn people to the righteousness that is theirs through faith in Jesus Christ. When our Lord, our Morning Star, returns, we will be raised to shine like stars in his presence. In the words of the prophet Daniel:

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:2-3).

According to an old legend, when the Magi were following the star of Bethlehem, they came to the house of a certain woman. They said to her, "Come with us! We have seen his star in the east and we are going to worship him." "Oh," she said, "I would love to go. I heard that he would be coming one day and I have been looking forward to it. But I can't come now. I must set my house in order; then I will follow you and find him." But when her work was done, the Magi were out of sight, the star shone no more in the heavens, and she never saw Jesus. (W. Herschel Ford)

Jesus, the Star of Wonder, has been disclosed to you. If Jesus has been disclosed to you, don't put it off, seek him now with all your heart.