

Epiphany

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

*⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”*

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12)

So Many Questions

Some Bible stories just raise questions. Do you know what I mean? For most of us, every time we hear certain biblical accounts, there’s something that we wonder about. I know that’s true for many of you because over the years, a fair number of you have come to me and asked those questions. Often, you start by saying, “Pastor, you know that story in the Bible? Well, I’ve always wondered ...” and then you ask whatever it is. That’s a good thing. It shows that you’re thinking about what you’re hearing. Well, for centuries, the text that we have before us today has provoked all kinds of questions – most of which we can’t answer. But all those questions lead us deeper into the meaning of what happened in Bethlehem.

I.

There are **so many questions** in this account. Let’s start with the most obvious: **what was this star?** You see it in almost every Christmas card and manger scene. Which is kind of funny, since this happened after the manger. What do I mean by that? Well, the star stopped over the place where the child was. That could be the stable. But the very next sentence says that the wise men went into the *house*. That’s not very surprising. Mary and Joseph wouldn’t have camped out in the stable with a newborn baby any longer than they had to. They were only there because the baby was coming and no other shelter was available. Once the baby came, of course they found a better place to stay. That indicates that the wise men did not come on Christmas. These men had followed the star from another country. It took time to do that. Since Herod later killed all the children of Bethlehem who were two years old and under, this may have happened several months, even a year or more after the first Christmas.

When the Magi came to Jerusalem, they said, “**Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.**” So they saw this star and then they traveled toward Israel, apparently following the star. That’s kind of a strange thing to do, don’t you think? If you’ve ever driven a long distance at night, you know that you can see stars up ahead of you. But you can drive all night and you will never seem to get any closer to them.

If they were following the star, why did they go to Jerusalem? Why not follow it straight to Bethlehem? The answer seems to be that the star disappeared. Herod asked them exactly when the star had appeared. He had to ask where to send them, so it doesn’t seem like they could see it anymore. And finally, when they left Jerusalem, Matthew says that they were overjoyed to see the star. So apparently, God took it

away for a time when they came, so they went to Jerusalem, the capital to ask for directions. When it reappeared, Matthew says that it went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the young child lay. Clearly, it did not appear like the stars that we see. They don't appear to move in such a way that you could follow them, turning left and right and finally stop at a specific house.

The star must have hung low in the heavens. In fact, it probably wasn't a star at all in the strict scientific sense that we use that term today. Some people have theorized that it was a comet or a supernova, but neither of those things really fit the description of what happened. The best we can say is that it was a light that God put in the sky to bring these men to Bethlehem. It was a miracle. It was something that never happened before and will not happen again.

Far more important than what it was is why God sent it. God wanted to announce the coming of the Christ. In that sense, this light is very similar to several other Old and New Testament phenomena that are associated with God. We usually call them the glory of the Lord. When the angels appeared to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born, the glory of the Lord shone around them. Many times in the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord either had light or fire associated with it. God was making a statement with this light in the sky: he was saying this child was his Son. Now, you may remember that twice during the Christmas season, I made the point that when Jesus came, there was no glory in the manger. That's true. But when it suited God's purpose, he did show the light, the glory. God used light to draw these men to see the Son of God who had come into this world.

But how did these men know that the star signified the birth of Christ – or as they called him, the king of the Jews? Well, the title itself gives us a clue. Clearly, they had had contact with Jewish people. Ever since the Babylonian Captivity, Jews had lived in the east. We know that there were Jewish communities in what is modern day Iraq at this time and for centuries afterward. Some people have speculated that the wise men knew a prophecy in the book of Numbers that says that a star would rise out of Israel. Perhaps there's some truth to that, although the star in the prophecy isn't a sign of Christ. It is Christ. The truth is, again, we don't know how they understood that this star meant that Jesus had been born. But they did understand.

We do know that again and again, God promised that a King would come to sit on David's throne and rule over God's people forever. Clearly, they knew about this promise. And when they arrived in Jerusalem, Herod summoned the priests and scribes to find out where the Christ was to be born. They pointed to another prophecy from the book of Micah that said that he would be born in Bethlehem, in the town where King David was born.

So God made the Wise Men depend on the Scriptures to get definite information about where they had to go. He didn't have the star lead them straight to the house in Bethlehem. First they had to go and hear the things that were written down. Only when they had the word of God telling them where to go, did God supplement that message with a star that served as a neon sign saying, "And this is the house in Bethlehem!" Even as God was guiding them with a miracle, he underlined the Bible as the final word of truth.

That Word is where we go to get the answers to our questions. That's why we spend so much time every week talking about what a specific text says. You know, there's no rule that says I have to preach from a text in the Bible. Occasionally, I don't. Many of the sermons in the Bible did not have a specific text the way we usually do. But every sermon in the Bible spoke about what God's Word says. The Word of God is our guide for faith and for life. It teaches us what God has promised and what he has done. It shows us the Savior, the God who became man, so that we will have eternal life. That's what God wanted these men to know. And it's what God wants us to know, too.

II.

There are **so many questions** in this reading. There's one that I've kind of been dancing around, but that we need to address: **Who are these men?** You probably grew up hearing them called kings, as in, "We Three Kings of Orient Are." But the Greek word *Magi* originally referred to a class of priests in ancient Persia. These priests were astrologers – so they studied the stars. But the word took on a much wider meaning. It could mean any person who possessed supernatural knowledge or abilities. It could mean magicians or sorcerers. It could even mean deceivers.

Here, it probably means priests of some kind from Babylon. That would make sense, because of that Jewish population there. But we really don't know for sure. In fact, we know very little about these men at all. How many were there? Traditionally, we've thought of three because of the three gifts they brought. And I

think that's a reasonable assumption. But the Bible doesn't say there were three. In the end, there's only one thing we can say with any certainty about these men: they were not Jewish, even though they were believers.

That is a very important point, because most of us are not Jewish. Up to this point in the story of Jesus' life, everybody has been Jewish. Mary and Joseph were Jewish. The shepherds outside of Bethlehem were Jewish. And the vast majority of the people that Jesus would see and speak with during his entire life were Jewish. But to make sure that we don't misunderstand, before Jesus was any more than two years old, God sent Gentiles to worship him. God sent people like us to make sure that we understand that we, too, are welcome in his family. Now, that may not seem like such a big deal to us, because today the vast majority of Christians are Gentiles. But you must understand what a radical change that was. For 1500 years, God dealt almost exclusively with the physical descendants of Abraham. God entrusted them with the Word and with all the promises and prophecies about Christ. God chose the Jewish people to be the human family of Christ.

So what about our ancestors? Again and again, God portrays the world as lost in darkness. That's not the way we like to think of ourselves. We human beings are taught from little on that we're smart. That science and technology have brought light into this world. And when we compare our lives with the lives people lived only a generation or two ago, that argument seems valid. Today, you teach your children to wash their hands because you know what germs are and what they do. But it wasn't that many generations ago that people scoffed at the idea that something so small that you couldn't even see it could actually hurt you. Today, you can whip out your smart phone and if you have the right app, you can scan the bar code of something you want to buy and find out if somebody else is selling it cheaper. When I graduated from college, that would've sounded like science fiction.

Our society believes that knowledge and education have brought light to a world that was hopelessly lost in ignorance and superstition. But there is another kind of darkness: the darkness of sin. The darkness of pride in our own accomplishments and our belief in our own righteousness and success. That kind of darkness is born into our hearts. It makes us self-righteous. It makes us believe that we are better than anybody else. It makes us believe that God would be lucky to have us in his kingdom. That kind of darkness is sin. The pride and sin of the human heart is universal. Every person who is born is born a sinner. Every person who is born is born thinking that they're basically good and God would be lucky to have them. Every person who has ever been born was born in darkness and doomed to spend eternity in the darkness of hell.

But Jesus is the light of the world. God sent him here to die and rise to pay for all that darkness that we were born with. Jesus paid for our pride. He paid for the idea that we are the light of the world. He paid for the ways that we acted on our darkness and all the damage we did to each other because of that darkness. He experienced hell itself on the cross and died in our place. Then he rose to set us free. And then, he sent that message out across the world. That message has so much light and power in it that today, the vast majority of people who live in the light are not descended from the one nation that had that light before Christ was born.

The Magi are the first taste of God's plan to share the gospel with the entire world. It was not enough for Jesus just to save the Jewish people. His payment was enough for all of us. Jesus died for you and for me. Jesus rose to give us life. And he came to us in our baptism. He came to us in the gospel that we've heard since we were little children. He came and opened our eyes. And still he comes and gives us light and life and hope. We will not always live in a world that swims in darkness. We have the light now, shining in the darkness. But one day soon, the darkness will be gone, and only the light will be left. Sin will be gone, and we will live with our Savior forever.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany. In many parts of the world, Epiphany is celebrated as Christmas because it's the first sign of God giving Jesus to people like us. In fact, for centuries, Epiphany, which actually falls on January 6th, was a far more important holiday than the one celebrated on December 25th. Today, Epiphany has become "the forgotten festival." That's too bad. Because this festival reminds us that God says to you and to me that we are part of his family. Treasure that love of God. Amen.