

Written Copy: Matthew 2:5-11 "What is Our Star?"

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Sunday, January 8th, 2022

Text: Matthew 2:5-11

⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judah, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Exegetical Statement

The long-awaited Messiah, the King of the Jews has been born. The angels announced it, the shepherds went and told, but no one in Jerusalem seems to have heard or believed. The Lord uses the Magi, foreigners who do not believe in Him, to spread the message. He uses means they would understand, being astrologers: a star to be His guiding hand. They spread the news in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews, which they see as the most likely place to find the newborn Jewish king. The people and their evil king react in fear and agitation instead of joy at this gift. Herod understands that they are looking for the Messiah, the Christ, who he sees as his rival to the throne. Still the Lord uses Herod and the chief priests and scribes to proclaim the whereabouts of this promised child according to Scripture. Yet none are moved to go and worship themselves, only unbelieving and evil Herod wants to know enough information to kill Him. The Lord once again works through the star to guide them right to the place where this promised Child is. They may have only sought Him originally to pay reverence due an exalted human figure, but when they arrive they fall prostrate and worship Him. They give this child, who is living in humble dwellings in a small village, gifts fit for a king in a palace. In this they foreshadow the Gospel calling the Gentiles to faith and their response of giving back treasures that demonstrate their love, thankfulness, and obedience to the Lord who has saved them from eternal damnation and given to them life everlasting

Focus Statement:

Our Lord works through means to call people to faith and keep them in faith. He used the star to call the Magi, used them to call out to Jerusalem, used Scripture in the hands of the unbelieving religious leaders as well as the evil intentions of Herod to send them on their way. He uses the Gospel in the hands of us the Church, and even the work of the devil to accomplish His purpose of calling people to faith and keeping us in faith

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Without the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Sacraments people would not come to faith or remain in faith. We would be as blind as Herod and the people of Jerusalem. We might have the head knowledge of the chief priests and the scribes, but not the desire to seek out our Savior or believe in Him.

What the hearer should do as a result:

As those who have been called to worship Jesus we should, like the Magi, offer heartfelt thanks and praise to Him, as well as give of our time, talents, and treasures to do the work of the star in our world, spreading the Gospel message that calls people to faith and keeps them in faith.

Subject Sentence: The Church is the Star through Gospel Proclamation

Introduction: God Works Thru Means: Normal/Supernatural

As someone who grew up outside of the Lutheran Church, one of the most important beliefs we hold fast to in my mind is that our Lord loves to work through means. He works through some of the most unlikely means at times. He works through things and people you would never pick on your own to accomplish the work He wants done. Yet through simple everyday means such as the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper He does miraculous and powerful things. He can and does at times use supernatural means, but not always. We have a great example of His work through both kinds of means in our Gospel Lesson today.

The Means the Lord Uses in Our Gospel Lesson

First of all, we have a star in the sky, one of about a billion plus filling it. What exactly is this star? Some biblical scholars try to associate it with one of the planets such as Jupiter or Neptune. Others want to explain it as a comet or some other naturally occurring celestial body. The only problem is this star caught the attention of astrologers who were used to studying the stars in the night sky. It caught their attention so strongly that it moved them to load up a storehouse of treasures and travel from the east, most likely Babylon or Persia, circling around the arch, following the Euphrates River where it crosses at the northern border of Palestine. While a naturally occurring, celestial body might be able to move them to go that far, no normal star could direct them to the exact house where they would find the baby Jesus. The Lord used a special manifestation in the sky. This star seems to be there only to guide these astrologers to the place the Lord wants them to go. No one else seems to take notice of it or take advantage of it to go find Jesus; not the people living in Jerusalem, not the Chief Priests and scribes, not Herod, only these "Wise Men".

And what about these "wise men" as our text calls them? First of all, despite what one of our favorite Christmas Carols might say, such as "We Three Kings of Orient Are", these so called "wise men" were not kings. Second of all, we should be very careful when we consider in what manner they were wise. They were men learned in worldly wisdom and in a variety of religions and worship practices of the nations that Persia, and Babylon before it, had conquered. The Greek word that is translated "Wise Men" is Magi. It is a title given by the Babylonians to men who acted as soothsayers, prognosticators, fortune tellers, and magicians to the Babylonian and Persian kings. You can see it as the root word for our English word magician. While they were perhaps wise in worldly wisdom, they were not wise in the faith and knowledge of the Lord. In the book of Daniel, we see King Nebuchadnezzar seek help from his Magi concerning a disturbing dream he had, which he could not remember the following morning. He wants to know both the dream and its meaning. None of his Magi could help him. Only Daniel, through the word and wisdom of the LORD God, could tell him what he needed to know.

These Magi were unbelieving Gentiles who the Lord used as His means. As those who collected knowledge of different religions, they no doubt had encountered Old Testament prophecy concerning the long-promised Messiah, the “King of the Jews”. Where did they learn of this? Not all of the Jewish exiles returned home after King Cyrus freed them. Those who remained may have been the source of the Magi’s knowledge of the prophecy found in the book of Numbers given by another non-Israelite soothsayer by the name of Balaam. He spoke of a star rising out from among the Israelites who would crush their enemies. The LORD used those Jewish exiles that remained, His prophetic word, the Magi’s interest in astrology, and this special manifestation of a star all as His means to draw them to Jerusalem.

While the prophecy and the star called them to come to Palestine, their faulty and incomplete human logic and wisdom brought them to the wrong location. In their minds a newborn King of the Jews should be found in the capital city of His people, in Jerusalem. So, they arrived and began asking where they might find Him. These Gentile unbelievers asking about the King of the Jews caused quite a ruckus in Jerusalem. It made the people troubled and agitated, and nobody more so than the reigning monarch, King Herod. Herod was a jealous, paranoid, and crazy man in his later years, always suspecting people of plotting his overthrow. And those he suspected he had killed, including his wife, three sons, brother-in-law, uncle, as well as others he suspected of trying to steal his throne. But even the Magi’s faulty human wisdom is used by the Lord to announce to Jerusalem the King of the Jews-the Messiah, has indeed been born.

Herod for his part knew that “The King of the Jews” was more than just a description of a rival to his throne, it was a Messianic title belonging to the Christ, the One foretold of in Scripture. Now Herod was not a believer in the LORD, but he knew that the Scripture contained information he could use. So, he turned to the experts, the chief priests, and the scribes: experts in the Jewish laws and Scripture, to find out where exactly this Messianic King was to be born. And it doesn’t take these religious leaders long to cite the answer: Bethlehem, the city of David, for this King would be born of David’s line. They for their part were well versed in the Messianic promise and should’ve been looking for His coming too. But the Magi’s announcement doesn’t move them to action.

It moves Herod though, who summons the Magi to a secret meeting, and gives them the information they need to get them headed in the right direction. He does so by pretending to share their interest in this child so that he too might worship Him. Except he has other ideas in mind. He questions them carefully to find out the exact time, how long ago it was, that this star appeared. He wants to know how old this child would now be. The answer the Magi give him is not given by Matthew. But we can assume that His age is under two years old, perhaps around a year old or maybe a little older, given that Herod, when he seeks to kill this child, orders that all the boys in Jerusalem two years old and under be killed. And that is the real reason Herod wants to know about this child, why he wants to know the location of this child, and why he sends the Magi out to find him. Herod has no interest in worshipping Him. Herod doesn't believe in any Messiah. Herod believes he has the power to alter the prophetic word by killing this rival to his throne.

But Herod is being used by the Lord as His means to fulfill that same prophetic word. By his sending the Magi out, and helping them to find baby Jesus, Herod is the LORD's means to gain a partial fulfillment of our Old Testament Lesson from **Isaiah 60: 5b-6** ^{5b} **the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.**

But Herod isn't the only means the LORD will use. He once again uses this special supernatural star. It guides them not just to the city of Bethlehem, but to the exact house where this infant King of Jews is found, the baby Jesus with His mother Mary. And these Magi fulfill the prophetic word when they fall prostrate in the presence of this child, and worship Him. These Magi rejoice with exceedingly great joy, joyful to the max, when the Lord provides the star to guide them. And regardless of who or what they thought of this child when they left their home country, when they come into His presence they do more than show the reverence expected of a human king. These foreigners are moved to worship Him. They are standing in the very presence of the same Lord God who used these various means to guide them there, and they worship Him as such. They respond as those who confess and believe this Child to be the Savior God. And they respond as those who believe by giving Him of their treasure as their act of worship and faithful obedience.

The Means the Lord Uses to Bring Us to Christ

We see the Lord working through means to bring both Jew and Gentile alike to baby Jesus, the Messianic King, the Lord God incarnate. That's how He worked then. And you know what? He still works through similar means today.

You and I were no different from these Magi before faith came into our hearts and lives. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, you and I would have no idea who that baby born King of the Jews really is, nor would we care. We could have the head knowledge of what God's word says about Him, but like the chief priests and scribes we would have no desire to seek Him out. And even if we did grasp the concept that there is a King of Kings who is God incarnate, who will judge all mankind one day, without the working of the Holy Spirit our reaction would be greater terror than the people in Jerusalem felt when the Magi came calling.

So, what was the means the Lord used to draw you to Jesus? What was the star in your life? It was the Spirit working through the Gospel Message. It was the Spirit working through Law and Gospel proclamation to show you your sin and then show you your Savior. It was the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel united with the waters of Baptism, bringing into your heart and mind who Jesus is and all He has done for you. It's His means of bringing the light of faith, enlightening your heart and mind to the salvation plan God had set out from the beginning. It's the means by which you confess and believe that Jesus came as a baby in order to grow to be a man who would take your place and your punishment for all the sins and disobedience that would separate you from God now and forever. The Gospel is the star that guided you to Jesus and showed you how His life, death, and resurrection is God's gift of grace, His gift of love, given for you, to save you from eternal death and give to you everlasting life.

That star is the continued work of the Gospel in your life, illuminating how Jesus' work to save you is still protecting you from the forces of evil, just as the Lord worked through the means of a dream sending the Magi home by a different route to protect baby Jesus. He is at work through the Spirit working in the word and in your life to protect you body and soul so that you stand in faith before Him on the Last Day.

We Are His Means to Be That Star to Others

The Lord works through means. And by bringing you to faith in Jesus Christ the Lord wants to use you as His means to guide others to His Son through your sharing of the Gospel Message. He is at work in the lives of those in the world to make them troubled, agitated, and fearful over all the things that go on in their lives and in the world, all the things that prove to them they are not in charge and they do not have the means to cope with what is beyond their control. He allows things like sickness, disease, cancer, Covid, marital difficulties, loss of possessions and loved ones to get them looking outside of themselves and beyond themselves for help,

And then He sends you and I as that guiding star to lead them to the only One who can help, who is Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, King of the Gentiles, Lord of your life and mine. He rules at the right hand of the Father over all that happens in their life. He wants us to point them to Him. He wants us to be the star that shines His love on them. He wants us to share the message that God loves them so much He came down and became one of us to stand in our place, and die for our sins to save us from a life lived apart from Him now and for eternity. He wants us to share with them the witness of our lives, how our faith in Him has helped us get through the tough times, the times of sickness and illness, the times of marital strife, the times of loss of possessions or loved ones. He wants us to tell them how He sends His Holy Spirit into our lives to be our constant Comforter and Companion.

And the means that we use to do this is the Gospel Message, the same message of Jesus life, death and resurrection that brought you to faith and keeps you in faith. The Spirit can and does work through your sharing of the Gospel as His means to do His miraculous work of conversion: creating faith in the lives of those where there is none and strengthening faith in lives of those who are struggling with the weight of the world. The same Spirit that brought you to faith will empower you to be that star by sharing that message of faith with those He sends you to, those who need to hear what God is doing in your life.

Conclusion: The Lord Works Through Means

Our Lord loves to work through means. He loves to work through the proclamation of the Gospel by broken sinful people like you, and even me. When I was a teenager and young adult no one would've ever thought I would one day get to serve my Lord as a Pastor. During that time in my life, I was living and loving the ways of the world. Many at the Church where I had attended as a young boy had written me off as a lost cause. But not my Lord and Savior. He who had baptized me as an infant kept His protective hand upon me throughout those years. And at just the right time, bringing just the right amount of trouble, agitation, and fear into my life, He turned me away from myself and back to Him. And the means He used, the star that shined out His love to me was the Gospel Message proclaimed by a broken sinful Pastor in a Lutheran Church. And here I stand today, doing the same thing, proclaiming His love and mercy through the gracious gift that is Jesus Christ our Lord. The means I've just used is the text of our Gospel Lesson. Perhaps some of what I've shared today can be the means by which He can use you to share the Gospel with others. Perhaps it's a simpler message of: God loves you; Jesus died for you and rose again so you can know your sins are forgiven and that He gives to you eternal life. Pray as to how the Lord might use you to be that star in guiding someone else to Jesus. Amen.