

Follow the Star: Trust the Vision

Text: Matthew 2: 9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...The star which they had seen at its rising went ahead of them...
Matthew 2:9

Today is the Festival of Epiphany. In the calendar of the Ancient Church this is a special Feast Day with which a new Season is inaugurated, the Season of Epiphany. We have celebrated the twelve days of Christmas. Christmastide moves today into Epiphany, the Season that extends to Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Season of Lent.

The theme of this Season is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Epiphany, the word, comes to us from the Greek; it means "manifestation." In this Season we celebrate the universality of the Gospel. Jesus was born of the House and lineage of David. The Angelic messenger to the shepherds said there was good news, great joy coming to the whole people, but in that context that probably was a reference to the whole House of Israel. We must go to Matthew for the Epiphany theme. He tells the romantic tale of the visit of the Magi who saw the rising of a star in their Eastern land and journeyed West to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem where they found the child Jesus, bowed down in adoration and offered him precious gifts.

In that search for the newborn king, their adoration, worship and offering, the Magi have become the symbol of the coming of the nations to the true God, to light and truth, to salvation. In the coming of Jesus, God brought the light of the knowledge of Himself to all nations, thus fulfilling the promise to Abraham that in him all peoples of the earth would be blessed.

Let this narrative recorded by Matthew be the focus of our reflection as we recognize in Jesus the revelation of God Who calls us to live by the vision that revelation provides.

To begin with, let us look at the story. We are told by Matthew of astrologers from the East who arrived in Jerusalem asking, "Where is the child who is born to be

king of the Jews?" They came according to the Gospel because they had observed "the rising of his star."

Who were they, these astrologers?

We sing of "three kings." They are referred to as "the Magi" in Christmas lore. Actually there is nothing in the record that speaks of their being kings and neither is there any reference to number. There is much popular mythology and legend that has sprung up around the story of the Nativity and later generations have embroidered it liberally. While we cannot be certain about these Eastern visitors, there is relative agreement that they were members of a priestly caste who engaged in occult arts and the name "Magi" refers to a broad range of persons involved in astrology (astronomy), fortune-telling, priestly augury and magicians. The "Magi" of Matthew were astrologers. We know that the ancient East had gained a great deal of knowledge of astronomy and there was a widespread conviction that human destiny was determined by the star under which one was born as well as the movement of the heavenly bodies. These Magi in Matthew's narrative

represent the best of pagan lore and religious perceptivity which has come to seek Jesus through a revelation in nature. (Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 168)

They came from East of Palestine. Three locations are proposed as their point of origin: Parthia, or Persia, Babylon, or Arabia, or the Syrian Desert. There are arguments in favor of each location but it is not important for us to pursue the matter. It is enough to know that the ancient East was known for its astronomical investigation and for priestly castes that studied the stars and ancient writings. There was a common belief that great events and the birth and death of great rulers were signaled in the heavens. Thus, whatever historical core lies behind the story of the visit of the Magi, it was not extraordinary that such astrologers should make such a journey and join in such a quest.

As to the star itself, what can we say? We have the story in its simple beauty. What the story is meant to convey we shall come to shortly. Perhaps it is best simply to leave the story as it is. Yet questions come to mind. Raymond Brown in his marvelous study of the nativity narratives writes of the "intrinsic unlikelihoods" of the story.

A star that rose in the East, appeared over Jerusalem, turned South to Bethlehem, and then came to rest over a house would have constituted a celestial phenomenon unparalleled in astronomical history; yet it received no notice in the records of the times. (*The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 188)

On the other hand, there were some unusual astronomical phenomena which occurred around the time of the birth of Jesus, which best estimates place in 6 B.C. Speculation suggests the heavenly light may have been a supernova or "new

star." It may have been a comet or it may have been a planetary conjunction. Brown explains the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

Jupiter and Saturn are the slowest of the visible planets in their orbit around the sun: for Jupiter there is an orbit every twelve years; for Saturn, every thirty years. In the course of these orbits the two planets pass each other every twenty years; and in so passing, even though they may be considerably north or south of each other, they are said to be in conjunction. A much rarer occurrence is when a third planet, Mars, passes during or shortly after the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, so that the three planets are close together. Kepler saw this occur in October 1604. He calculated that it happens every 805 years and that it had happened in 7-6 B.C. ... From calculations we know that the three high points of the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn were in May/June, September/October, and December of 7 B.C. - a rare triple conjunction. ... - and that Mars passed early the next year. This "great conjunction" of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the zodiacal constellation of Pisces. ... Pisces is a constellation sometimes associated with the last days and with the Hebrews, while Jupiter (an object of particular interest among Parthian astrologers) was associated with the world ruler and Saturn was identified as the star of the Ammonites of the Syria-Palestine region. The claim has been made that this conjunction might lead Parthian astrologers to predict that there would appear in Palestine among the Hebrews a world ruler of the last days. (p. 173)

This is all very speculative as Brown asserts; yet it is fascinating and it does immerse the story of the Magi's visit with mystery and wonder.

As already indicated, we cannot strip off the legendary aspects of the nativity narrative and get down to the "facts." Scripture is not a book of "facts" in that sense. The Word was made flesh. That is fact – historical truth. Jesus was born at a particular time and place. He grew and entered upon his ministry, was crucified and raised from the dead, ascending to the Father where he reigns and from whence he will appear a second time. The Apostles and the Early Christian community were certain of the risen Christ who was the same as Jesus of Nazareth. As they witnessed to God's revelation in him they told the story of his birth and his life, death and resurrection.

That is what we have in our Gospels of which Matthew is one. As this Gospel was composed, there was a specific purpose in its composition. Matthew included a nativity narrative and that narrative included the story of the Magi.

Why?

What was Matthew telling us with this story?

It is the consensus of biblical scholarship today that this Gospel called Matthew was written in Syria by an unknown Greek-speaking Jewish Christian living in the 80's in a mixed community with converts of both Jewish and Gentile descent. The writer was concerned to instruct the community of mixed background. Matthew interprets what he sees happening in the first century Church. As Brown writes,

A Christian community, at first Jewish, had seen an increasing number of Gentiles come to believe; and with the rejection of Christians by the Synagogue, it now seemed as if the Kingdom were being taken away and given to a "nation" that would bear fruit (21:43). In this situation of a mixed community with dominance now shifting over to the Gentile side, Matthew is concerned to show that Jesus has always had meaning for both Jew and Gentile. (p. 47)

Thus asserts Brown,

In the person of the Magi, Matthew was anticipating the Gentile Christians of his own community. Although these had as their birthright only the revelation of God in nature, they had been attracted to Jesus; and when instructed in the Scriptures of the Jews, they had come to believe in and pay homage to the Messiah. (p. 199)

This is the meaning of Epiphany and the message of this Season. God's calling of Abraham was the calling of one to reach the many. God's long and patient dealing with Israel in the Old Covenant was in order to bring finally to the world the Saviour of all. Matthew tells us of Magi from the East who followed the star and trusted the vision of the birth of one who would rule the world with righteousness. On this Epiphany Sunday, then, let us recognize that

I. God has revealed Himself.

This is a foundational truth of our faith. Having just come through the Christmas Season again, we have celebrated that divine visitation of our planet by the Eternal God in the flesh of Jesus. We have heard those great New Testament affirmations again —

the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory...
John 1:14

We have seen the light of revelation - the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. II Corinthians 5:6

...in this the final age he (God) has spoken to us in the Son ... who is the effulgence of God's splendor and the stamp of God's very being...Hebrews 1:2

What these writers affirm in theological reflection Matthew tells us in a story, the story of a star and of those hungry for God who traveled mile after weary mile until they found the child born to be a king. Matthew was pointing to a sign in Nature which triggered the longing of the human heart for a knowledge of God. And the point he was making was that the sign was given for all the world to see. The Magi are used by him as signs of that universal revelation of God to all humankind. Paul speaks of God's revelation in the natural order.

For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made. Romans 1:19, 20

Paul goes on in that passage to show how that knowledge has been suppressed by mankind. Nonetheless the revelation is there had we eyes to see it.

Bringing the Magi to Herod's court where they learned of Micah's prophecy of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem was Matthew's way of saying that the revelation of God in Nature is not sufficient to bring one to a knowledge of the grace of God. Yet the truth remains; God has revealed himself and in Jesus that revelation came to all humankind.

God has revealed himself. That is our bedrock conviction. That is the heart of Christmas and the truth of Epiphany.

II. Those who seek him will surely find him.

In the visit of the Magi Matthew finds the sign of the coming of people of every tribe and nation. That was a giant breakthrough in the thinking of the Jewish Christian community. The struggle of the Early Church on the question of the Gentile converts to Jesus is recorded in the Book of Acts. Matthew is saying that what was happening in that early community was right on schedule and according to plan.

God so loved the world that whosoever ...

There was an exclusiveness in the Old Testament. Yet had not the prophet Jeremiah written centuries before,

When you seek me, you shall find me; if you search for me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord. Jeremiah 29:13

In the Magi we have representatives of those who hunger for God and whose hunger is satisfied. They were seekers and searchers after God. They had no doubt studied ancient writings. They may very well have known of the ancient

prophecy of Balaam recorded in Numbers 24:17 about the star that would rise out of Jacob. They were men open to revelation, seeking the truth.

We might say that these were early examples of the human hunger for transcendence. They were seeking something more beyond the limits of space and time. They lived in a world filled with mystery. They believed that beyond the world there was One Who wrote in the stars. They believed that behind the appearance of Reality there was One Who made the planets do His bidding. They followed the star and trusted the vision. They acted on their faith and they found the Saviour.

Those who seek Him will surely find Him.

III. Those who find Him worship Him.

This, too, is clearly Matthew's intent in portraying the Magi in Eastern magnificence bowing before the child offering their treasures. The universality of God's revelation and the universality of the yearning in the human heart are matched by the universality of the response of those who see the glory of the Father in the face of the Son. This is something we take for granted perhaps, but it was an amazing discovery to those who had been brought up in the exclusiveness of Judaism, who had been taught that the non-Jew was something less than human. Certainly there had been those strains of universalism - in Abraham's call and in the prophetic vision of the exaltation of Mount Zion and the flowing of the nations to Jerusalem. But it was nonetheless a truth hardly conceivable and thus one of the major stumbling blocks in the world evangelization which happened in Paul's ministry - that God was making of Jew and Greek one new humanity - united in the worship of God through Jesus Christ.

In these Eastern visitors Matthew saw the sign of the world coming to the Saviour who would be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

Do you sense what a compelling vision that was? In the midst of an occupied people in a tiny piece of the earth's surface, in the poverty and humility of a peasant family was born a child - a child, Matthew declares,

who is the light of the revelation of the glory of God for all people of all time.

That is the stupendous claim of the Christian Gospel. In the worship of the Magi Matthew witnesses to the universal truth of the Gospel that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the Saviour of all, who draws all people to him.

Those who find him worship him, for those who find him find God.

We have just celebrated another Christmas. We stand on the threshold of a new year. What has the celebration done for us? In what mind and spirit do we enter this new year? The lessons of the Magi visit are simple and clear:

God has revealed Himself; those who seek Him find Him; those who find Him worship Him.

Will the truth so recently celebrated be connected to the restless longing of our hearts and will we respond to the revelation of God's glory with adoring worship and committed life?

It does not follow automatically. It is possible to be so caught up in trivial pursuits and penultimate matters that we never see the star nor follow the Saviour.

The Magi came to Jerusalem where Herod was King and their question posed to him, not the possibility of the advent of the Saviour of the world, but rather a threat to his throne, his rule and authority. On December 28 the Church celebrated the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the remembrance of Herod's decree that all male children two years old and under should be slain. Such a ruthless deed can hardly be conceived of. Yet that is precisely the bestiality of which human pride and blind ambition is capable.

George Schultz leads the American delegate to Geneva where he will engage the Russian delegates in arms talks. There will be posturing and maneuvering but the bottom line will be to come out in the position of power because our world lives under the delusion that security resides in power and the greater nuclear arsenal when, as a matter of fact, those very arsenals on either side of the great ideological divide have made the world more insecure than at any time in its history.

And to what lengths will either side not go if threatened? Is there any stopping point in this international madness? Perhaps only Herod's desperate conspiracy to rid the world of God's Messiah can be compared with our present age marching to its doom. Not truth, mercy and compassion, but power; that is our madness.

The Magi came to Jerusalem and the Scribes and chief priests, the servants of God, His representatives among the people were able to answer the question when the Messiah was to be born, but we hear nothing of their own pilgrimage to find him. But before we are too hard on them, let us remind ourselves that we just celebrated the coming of God in our time and space and, yet, has not perhaps our very familiarity with that amazing story left us dull and untouched?

If God has come to us, revealed His grace to us, placed His claim upon us, what sort of people then ought we to be?

Need I expand on that question? Does not the question itself convict us of the apathy and spiritual deadness of our lives?

But the Season is Epiphany, the sign is a star, the truth - God revealed in Jesus, and all who hunger and yearn and long for God will find Him and finding Him, worship and in worship find their true selves.

And those that find God in the face of Jesus will be a people of hope, knowing that God has entered our past to give us a sign of our future - a future determined not by human possibility but by the grace and power of God Who will create new heaven and a new earth. His People are a people of hope living in the present in light of the future, which God has prepared for those that love Him.

We have celebrated Christmas. Now it is ours to live out in all our ordinary days, following the star, trusting the vision.

Reference:

Raymond E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. Anchor Bible Reference Library, Doubleday, 1993.