

*Living Nativity: The Heavens Declare the Glory of God*

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*Psalm 19; Isaiah 40:25-31; Matthew 2:1-12*

Our final Scripture reading is from Matthew 2:1-12. May God bless the reading of His holy, perfect, and sacred Word. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When 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. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “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.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He 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.” After 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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

“Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.” Any of you remember that nursery rhyme? I haven’t thought about it in decades, but I did when I was thinking about this week’s sermon. It was first recorded in a book of American nursery rhymes in the late 1800s, but the tradition of seeing the first star or shooting stars or a falling star dates back millennia. Maybe I haven’t thought of it because it wasn’t one we taught to our kids; maybe it’s because it’s pretty rare to see the stars in Detroit with all the lights of the city. But I remember that rhyme, and I remember believing it was true. All I know is that considering the number of wishes I made and the number that came true, I was probably wishing on satellites and not stars!

A fascination with the stars is nothing new for us. How many museums have a planetarium show? I still see news articles on a regular basis when something strange gets observed out in the universe. Just the other day, I read about how NASA recently spotted something coming out of a black hole. That’s not supposed to be able to happen! It shows us just how little we understand about what’s out there. And we are following in the footsteps of the ancients before us, who were utterly fascinated with what they saw in the heavens.

As we continue our Living Nativity series today, we once again are exploring how God uniquely made known to us the birth of His Son, and how far from being boring old stories that we hear year after year, they still speak to us – they are still living reminders of Jesus’ coming to us. Today, we’re going to focus on the story of the star the wise men followed as they made their long journey to worship the infant king.

From top to bottom, the story of the wise men and the star is bizarre. It's a story that no one would include except for the fact that, well, it's true. Sometime following Jesus' birth – we're not sure when, exactly – “magi” from the east come to Jerusalem wanting to worship the newly-born king of the Jews. This whole situation puts Jerusalem in an uproar for so many reasons. One is these “magi.” It's traditionally been translated “wise men,” and our translation, perhaps wisely, leaves it as the Greek word “magi.” No one wants to translate this word exactly because throughout the Bible – the Old Testament translation into Greek and the New Testament – the word “magi” means magician or sorcerer. It's too hard to explain what's going on without some interpretation.

Why are there magicians coming to see Jesus? Why would a sorcerer come to Israel? Remember that God's Law strictly forbid the Israelites from pursuing magic, and even called for the death penalty for those who practiced witchcraft and the dark arts. Not only that, but Deuteronomy 17 warned about the death penalty specifically for those who turned away from God and bowed down to the sun or the moon or the stars. These guys had a lot of nerve showing up in the holy city of Jerusalem. No wonder the whole city was disturbed, and King Herod too. They were not just pagans; there were plenty of Roman soldiers and Gentiles in Jerusalem due to the politics of the Roman empire. These guys were something else entirely. At first appearance, the wise men would have appeared to be the sworn enemies of God.

But that doesn't turn out to be the case. They don't worship the stars; instead, they have followed a star that appeared in the east. That was the tell-tale sign for them that the king of the Jews had been born. Understand that the mystics and astrologers of the day saw all sorts of signs in the sky. People took them at face value in the ancient world. In fact, when a comet appeared near the end of Nero's reign, Nero took it so seriously that he had a great number of his political rivals killed so that the predictions surrounding the comet and his death wouldn't come true.

But that doesn't mean that God didn't use signs in the heavens. Keep in mind that Halley's Comet was visible from earth around roughly 11BC. There was a supernova in the sky according to ancient Chinese records around 4BC. In 7BC, there was a planetary conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter that would have been seen from the east as settling over Israel during that era. Were one of these the star the astrologers saw? Or was it some otherwise unknown supernatural phenomenon? Who knows! What we do know is that several different celestial happenings occurred in such a short time that it could have been clear to the wise men that a prophecy had been fulfilled.

So why do the wise men believe the star means that the king of the Jews has been born? What's funny is that the scribes don't point to that prophecy in Scripture. It doesn't seem that they were expecting a star. Why not? Maybe they weren't looking closely. There aren't a lot of prophecies about the Messiah being hailed by a star in the sky. There's exactly one that could be read that way if you take it literally, from Numbers 24:17 – “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” Do you remember made that prophecy? None other than the wayward prophet Balaam we studied two weeks ago – Balaam, the prophet from the far east, 450 miles away from the land of Israel, who knew the Lord and prophesied about Jesus' coming even though his greed got the better of him. These astrologers know the history of their people, who heard from Balaam of this star to come.

And this was not the last time the peoples of the East came into contact with the God of the universe and His people. During the time when the remnant of Israel was exiled in Babylon, a young man named Daniel and his companions served in the royal house. Daniel was the only one who could interpret the king's dreams, in spite of the fact that he surrounded himself with magicians and sorcerers. Daniel had dreams and visions of the coming Messiah which he called "the Son of Man." The memories of that time, combined with the ancient prophecy of Balaam, explain why these strange visitors from a faraway land made their way to hostile territory.

The story of the star doesn't end in Jerusalem, though. The wise men stop there, perhaps because Jerusalem was the capital city. Ultimately, the wise men are sent on their way by King Herod to Bethlehem on the information from the scribes that the Messiah was supposed to be born there. Why didn't the star lead them there in the first place? Well, Bethlehem is only five miles south of Jerusalem. We rarely think about this, but our home in Mount Clemens is further away from church here today than Bethlehem is to the south side of Jerusalem. It's about a two-hour walk. It would be expected that a king would be in the royal city. They were following what made the most sense.

But God had other plans. All of a sudden, this star that the wise men have been following takes flight. It leads them to the place where Jesus is. It might have been some astrological phenomenon, some comet or planetary alignment, but here we have nothing less than the hand of God guiding the magi to their destination. Maybe you remember that God led the people of Israel through the wilderness as a pillar of wind by day and a pillar of fire by night. Well, I believe it may very well be the Holy Spirit that shone so bright and led the magi to their destination.

That also explains why they are so excited to spot the star again – they are overjoyed because they are once being led to the prophesied One. And when they arrive, of course they give their gifts, but they also worship Jesus. They know they are in the presence of divinity. They don't just bow down as you would before a king, they worship the King of Kings.

This whole story is amazing, almost beyond belief. Sages from the east likely steeped in the magical arts make their way across hundreds of miles, following a star in the skies, to worship a baby that no one in all of Jerusalem seems to know about. The star takes flight and guides them through the night to the home of Jesus. Crazy, miraculous, wonderful! But where does our story meet this story? I'm sure we wish some days that we were led around by a star where to go and what to do. If it were only that easy, right? But the story of the star and the wise men teaches us less about the constellations and more about the nature of God and the nature of true faith.

*Creation, and especially the vast creation we can only see in the skies, is meant to point us to the Creator.* All the extraordinary features of the universe were made to show us that God exists and created it all. Hear how Scripture describes the role of creation in showing us what God can do and what He has done. Psalm 19:1-3 – "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard."

Nehemiah 9:6 – “You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.” Psalm 89:5 – “The heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.” Psalm 148:5 – “Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.” Those just scratch the surface of what Scripture has to say.

As we are want to do, we missed the point. In fact, humanity has often been tempted to worship the creation rather than the Creator. But God made the universe, in all of its vastness and wonder, to point to Himself, to give us a glimpse into His eternal glory and goodness. God doesn’t want us to seek signs in the stars because He has given us His permanent sign in His Son – the sign of His love, compassion, and grace.

And yet, He used a star to bring even the pagan world to Himself. Psalm 22, which predicts the suffering of Jesus on the cross, tells us that because of Jesus, “all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.” The star is the beginning of bringing those who are far from God back to Him. The star reminds us that God will stop at nothing to bring His chosen into His Kingdom.

The next time you see the night sky and notice the stars or the moon, when you see a beautiful sunset, when you see the beauty of new-fallen snow or the first flowers peeking through in spring, remember that we have those things because God made them for us, to show us He loves us. He made us with an appreciation for them. They are meant to bring you to worship Him, to pray, to read His Word, to get to know Him better. For He is the creator of all good things and the giver of all good gifts.

A second thought: *True faith has less to do with knowledge and more to do with follow-through.* It is truly amazing that anybody anywhere followed a star to Jerusalem. Let’s be serious – if we have it right, and we may not, the only prophecy about a star rising out of Judah was over 1,400 years old at the time of the wise men. Maybe, if these men were from the region of Babylon, they had heard the stories of the coming Messiah from the ancestors of those who knew Daniel and his companions. But there was so precious little to go on. And yet they came.

And can you imagine how much the magi dealt with in coming to Israel? To worship this king, they knew they had to put away whatever mystical arts they had been taught. They were risking being rejected by their own culture for laying down their pagan beliefs. They were incredibly wealthy to give the gifts to Jesus that they did – but how much of their wealth did that cost? I wonder – did they give up both home and financial security on the promise of a star?

And did they come knowing it was a risk for them even to enter Judah, knowing how they’d be received as foreign astrologers? They had no map. When they reach Jerusalem, everybody treats them with shock. (Herod’s distrust of the Magi is probably what kept Jesus safe from harm!) They are overjoyed when the star returns because it is their only hope of finding the Christ child. You want to talk about faith? The magi had it. They trusted that the Creator of the universe would lead them to their destination.

The scribes in Jerusalem had all the knowledge of the Old Testament at their fingertips, along with all the teachings passed down from generations of rabbis. They had every scrap of information God had given to His people available to them. When presented with the question of where the Messiah was to be born, they give the right answer. So why do none of them join the Magi? Why do these learned scholars, brainiacs about the Word of God, not go to Bethlehem when they discover the Christ might be there? They had all the knowledge and none of the follow-through. They lost sight of the living nativity – they lost sight that God is not just some distant being in a dusty book but very real and very alive and very much keeping His promises. They got the trivia question right and missed worshipping our Lord and Savior.

I don't know how many people over the years I've met who think they aren't qualified or capable enough to talk to someone about their faith. They think they don't know enough. But the wise men weren't wise because they knew the Jewish belief system forwards and backwards. They were wise because they put their faith into action. If they had waited to know why God had put a star in the sky or where exactly it would lead, if they had to know all about the king of the Jews, they would have never gone.

And so I plead with all of us today – let's put our faith in action. Doesn't have to be perfect, doesn't have to be overt or showy. We don't have to convert the world today. But we do need to put the faith we have into practice. We don't have to know why we have to love our enemies; we just have to love our enemies. We don't have to understand everything God did in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be kind to someone today. We don't have to have every answer to invite someone to church next Sunday. While we should study God's Word to learn to know Him better, to know His love for us, God is less interested in our knowing everything and more interested in our following the light He has shined before us.

And that's where the element of risk comes in. There's little risk in studying who God is. There are plenty of atheists out there with Ph.Ds in religious studies, who study the Scripture merely as an academic exercise. There's risk in a living and active faith. The magi risked a lot. They risked being seen as fools in their home culture, as unworthy Gentile trash in a foreign culture; they risked never finding the child.

Yet God came through for them. When the time came, God did the extraordinary and provided them the star again. The glory of God shone for them and became the light that led them as it did the Israelites in the wilderness, leading them right to the Savior. Yes, there's an element of risk for us too to live as faithful people in a world that no longer values the love of God. But I also believe that it's in that risk that God will shine for us and we will see Him at work guiding us, loving us, and providing for us.

The star of Bethlehem is proof positive that the heavens declare the glory of God. It reminds us that God so loved the world that He would bring people from around the nations to Himself. Will you be guided by God's love and grace the same way the wise men were guided by the star on their journey?