



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Sermon for the Epiphany

St. Matthew 2:1-12

Rev'd Dr. Matt Colvin

January 7, 2010 – The Epiphany

AFTER Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)

The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Isaiah 60:3

birth of the king is noticed by

gentiles

birth of the king is signified by the heavenly bodies

the king is given gifts by the gentiles

the false king tries to kill him, but his doom is sure

We have just finished celebrating Christmas: the entry of Israel's Messiah, God in the flesh, coming into the world as a baby in Bethlehem. Today we celebrate Epiphany — actually the 6th of January, yesterday — the celebration of the manifestation, the showing of Jesus (for that is what epiphany means). Our gospel reading concerns the magi. What I want to show you today is the way in which the visit of the magi pulls back the veil and manifests Jesus in terms of the story of Israel. To do that, we need to recognize the connections between this story and the Old Testament. So keep your finger in Matthew 2, and be ready to turn with me to other passages so that we can make the connections that would have been obvious to Jewish readers.

Who are magi? Zoroastrian priests. Zoroastrianism was the religion of ancient Persia, the country corresponding to modern day Iran. It was a religion overseen by a priestly class whom Herodotus calls "magi". Just one would be a "magus". This is the source of our English word "magic". In Greece, the Babylonians and eastern peoples generally had a reputation for being skilled in astronomy, mathematics, and astrology — a reputation due in part to their superior system of mathematics, based on the number 60, which lies behind our 360 degrees in a circle and our 60 minutes in an hour. This gave them the ability to calculate astronomical, the appearances of planets and stars, with greater accuracy than the Greeks. Zoroaster or Zarathustra, the main prophet of Zoroastrianism, was reputed to have been the inventor of astrology and magic, and to speak of "Chaldaeans" in Hellenistic Greece was to call up all these associations.

On top of that, we should note that Zoroastrianism was a monotheistic religion. Darius the Great was a great champion of it; he hated polytheism, and was predisposed to favor the Jews, as fellow monotheists. His predecessor Cyrus may also have been a

Zoroastrian; that may be part of what motivated him to favor the Jews and allow them to return to their land and rebuild the temple. So it is possible that the magi who came to visit Jesus in Matthew 2 likely came as god-fearers who recognized the truth of the Israelite religion.

They come because they "have seen his star in the east." So, what are we to think of their astrology? Nowadays, there are horoscopes columns in newspapers, predicting the future. I clicked on mine, and it read:

"Jan 6, 2018 - An unexpected lucky break could come your way today, Virgo - something you would never have expected in a hundred years. It could seem like a dream come true, yet it could disrupt your life in some way. You might find yourself facing a choice: go for it and change your entire way of life or let it go and take the risk that another great opportunity might never appear. Who said life was easy? Think about it!"

Notice the studied ambiguity: no telling what the lucky break is; it has an upside and a downside, and most things tend to. Lots of weasel words: it *could* come your way; you *might* find yourself facing a choice; another great opportunity *might* never appear, etc. In other words, it is just like an elaborate fortune cookie paper. It is certainly not an accurate prediction, and the author has no knowledge about my life at all, that he should be trusted. Why not? Because he is consulting the stars, and the stars have nothing to tell him.

Why do the stars not control the world? Because Jesus does. Jesus is ruling the universe. That is the significance of his ascension and his sitting at the right hand of the Father: not to remove him from the world so that it can get along without him, but to place him in the control room of the world, so that he is equally close to every point on earth, and has access to the levers of the universe. He is in control. Not the stars. But was it always this way? I think we assume

that of course stars don't control events here on earth. As James Jordan puts it,

“When twentieth-century people step outside and look at the sky, they see a huge atomic furnace burning hydrogen during the day, and a small planetoid reflecting the light of the sun at night. They also see other atomic furnaces that appear very small because they are so far away.”

Obviously, if a star is nothing but a huge atomic furnace burning hydrogen, then it can't have anything to tell us about what is going to happen in the history of human events here on earth. But C.S. Lewis has two good answers to this. First, he has coined a clever word: whenever someone says that “the stars are nothing but burning hydrogen” or “the human mind is nothing but electrical impulses firing in the brain” or “gender is nothing but a social construct” or “love is nothing but chemicals bubbling in your veins” — C.S. Lewis calls this sort of thing “nothing buttery.” And in one of his Narnia stories, the Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the spoiled atheistic boy Eustace Scrubb meets Ramandu, who explains that he is a retired star waiting to be rekindled and put back in the sky.

“In our world,” said Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.” Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.”

If we look at the creation of the sun, moon, and stars in Genesis 1:16, we read this:

Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also. ¹⁷ God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness.

Notice that the heavenly bodies are said to “rule over” the day and the night. Elsewhere in the Bible, we find that the heavenly bodies are associated with heavenly beings — not angels, precisely, but “the sons of God” or the rulers and principalities in the heavenly places. These are God's courtiers, his privy councillors in his royal court in heaven. In Job 38:4-7, God asks Job:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

Thus, the “sons of God,” these heavenly beings, are associated with the stars. Augustine and other church fathers associated these heavenly beings with the gods of ancient Greco-Roman paganism. Notice how the planets are in fact named after them: Jupiter, Saturn, Venus, Mars, Mercury.

The book of Hebrews indicates that these heavenly beings used to be in charge of the world, but they aren't anymore. The Jews thought about history in terms of two ages: the present age and the age to come. And the Hebrew word for “the age” is not merely a time-word. It is the word *'olam*, which can mean “world” or “eternity”, as we see in that verse where Jesus tells his hearers that “whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.” The Jews understood the age to come or the world to come to be a time when Israel's God would be recognized by all peoples, and Israel's anointed king, the Messiah, would be acknowledged and submitted to by everyone. This is in contrast the present age, by which is meant the

time when the Messiah had not yet come, was not yet ruling over the world, and the world was still under the rule of angels. The author of Hebrews puts it this way:

⁵ For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. ⁶ But one testified in a certain place, saying: “What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him? ⁷ You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, And set him over the works of Your hands.

⁸ You have put all things in subjection under his feet.” For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. ⁹ But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.

Thus, the coming of Jesus, made a little lower than the angels by becoming a man while they still rule the world, is heralded — first by the angels that appeared to the shepherds, and then by the glorious powers that rule the heavens, as the star guides the magi to seek for the one who is born king of the Jews. And we are now living in the reign of Jesus: he has been enthroned in the highest heavens, and all the powers of the heavenly bodies have been made subject to him. That is why astrology doesn't work anymore, but it might well have worked for the Magi.

But notice that although they have “seen his star in the east”, they don't follow the star to where Jesus is until after they have inquired where he is supposed to be born. Their astrology has not clued them in about the precise place of his birth. The answer to that question is not found in the stars. It is found in the Scriptures of Israel:

Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, Herod inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“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.”

Thus, the magi, in order to know about Israel’s king, need to be guided by Israel’s Scriptures. And to see him, they need to come to Israel; they have to make a pilgrimage. There is no question of just remaining in their own country and practicing Zoroastrianism: “Oh, look, the stars say that there’s a new king born over the Jews. That’s nice. Let’s go worship Ahura Mazda.” No, they have to saddle up their camels and make a thousand-mile pilgrimage, and when they get there, they need to bow down to him.

Are the magi kings? Not really, fun though it is to sing “We three kings of Orient are”. In ancient Persia, the magi were a priestly class, not royalty. But they were the elite of Persian society and they held considerable political power. You may have seen the traditional names for them: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar, and Balthasar is always depicted as black, since the 12th century. This is a pious fiction, but it rests on a truth: the arrival of the magi was seen by early Christians as a fulfillment of various OT prophecies that in the future, the rulers of the Gentiles would acknowledge Israel’s God and lay their treasures at the feet of Israel’s king. It is a prophecy of this sort that we have in Isaiah 60:

The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. ⁴ *“Lift up your eyes all around, and see: They all gather together, they come to you; Your sons shall come from afar, And your daughters shall be nursed at your*

side. ⁵ *Then you shall see and become radiant, And your heart shall swell with joy; Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you.* ⁶ *The multitude of camels shall cover your land, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.*

It is a prophecy of Israel becoming the center of a huge empire like Persia or Assyria, with ships importing luxury goods from all over the Mediterranean world. And the arrival of magi from Persia is, as it were, a sneak preview, a mini-fulfillment of this prophecy.

We may ask why Herod did not say, “You are looking for the king of the Jews? Here I am, pleased to meet you. Would you like to kiss my ring?”

There are two answers to that: one is that Herod was not news; he had been reigning for 25 years already, and nobody would have thought that a star was heralding him at this time.

Another is that Herod was not a Jew. He was an Idumean, a descendant of the Edomites, children of Esau, and not of Jacob. He had been placed on the throne as a client king by Mark Antony, and then confirmed in that position by the Roman Senate and by the Emperor Augustus. He was, thus, thoroughly a creature of the Romans, and cordially despised by most of the Jews, who saw him as a symbol of their people’s oppression at the hands of the Gentiles. Herod took steps to try to ingratiate himself in the eyes of the Jews — marrying a princess of the previous line of Jewish kings, and building new additions onto the Jerusalem Temple — but none of this really worked to make him more popular, and he continued to be regarded as an unJewish monarch.

Certainly, Herod was not a fulfillment of the OT prophecies concerning the Messiah from the tribe of Judah — the

anointed king descended from David. Herod is certainly not “the one born king of the Jews”, whom the magi came from the east to worship — literally, to bow down before. In the next part of this chapter, right after our reading, Herod tries to kill Jesus and ends up slaughtering all the male children aged 2 and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem. What situation should this remind us of? Where else have we seen a wicked king killing the babies of the people of God, but failing to destroy the one baby who will turn out to be the deliverer? Yes: Pharaoh. The outcome of this story will prove that Herod is in fact a wicked enemy of God’s anointed king, a Pharaoh figure who will massacre all the male infants of Bethlehem. In Dr. Seuss’s book, the grumpy green Grinch tried to find a way to stop Christmas from coming. Herod is trying to put it back in the bottle now that it has already come.

He is, in fact, a usurper, the wicked king who is a recurring figure in mythology and literature. Think of Hamlet’s father, the true king, and Hamlet’s wicked uncle Claudius, who murdered him; think Richard the Lionhearted and the wicked King John who took over his throne while he was away on crusades in Robin Hood; Mufasa and the wicked Scar in The Lion King. And when Herod’s son Herod Antipas takes the throne and rules during Jesus’ earthly ministry as an adult, he is the one character in Israel for whom Jesus has no kind words at all: “that fox...” he calls him. No, the Magi have not come for Herod. They have come for Jesus, because this king of the Jews is also king of the Gentiles; and in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 60, the magi give him gifts: “They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.” Or as Malachi puts it:

From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my Name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered

*unto my Name, and a pure offering:
for my Name shall be great among the
heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.*
(Malachi 1:11)

If the magi with their gifts are a mini-fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, what is the bigger fulfillment? It is in Revelation 21, where we are given a vision of the New Jerusalem. John writes:

“I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.”

See how the themes we have discussed are all united here? The heavenly bodies and their glory — the sun, moon, and stars that ruled the old creation — are out of a job. They have been replaced by the glory of the Lamb. And the city of God, the new Jerusalem, has become a gleaming habitation not only for Israel, but for the nations. What started with a visit of just three Persian astrologers at Jesus' birth has become a streaming influx of Gentiles from every country under heaven. What started with token gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, has become ownership of the glory and honor of the nations.

That's the message of Epiphany. It is one of these moments — the transfiguration is another — when Jesus is shown forth with a foretaste of the glory that he gains more fully at his ascension to the right hand of God. Things that belong to the age to come are happening on a small scale; the larger fulfillment will see kings and emperors bowing the knee to Jesus. Constantine, Charlemagne, Elizabeth II.

The Kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever.
Amen.