



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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He Shall Reign Forever and Ever **Isaiah 60:1-9 &** **St. Matthew 2:1-12** Fr. William Klock

January 12, 2020 – The Epiphany
(Observed)

When I was little my great-grandmother used to read to me from a beautifully illustrated edition of Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha". I was as much captivated by the pictures as I was by the poem, especially one painting that showed Hiawatha looking up into the night sky to see the Milky Way—that swath of dense stars across the night sky. I would go outside, but I couldn't see it. There was too much light pollution to really see the stars. That's been the case in almost every place I've lived.

The exception was the three years I lived in south-eastern Washington when I was in University. Pullman is out in the middle of nowhere, nestled into the rolling wheat fields of the Palouse region. If you ask someone at the University of Washington in Seattle how to get to Washington State they'll tell you: "Go east 'til you smell it, then south 'til you step in it." There's nothing around but wheat and cows. One Saturday, though, my friends and I spent the day even further into the middle of nowhere, water-skiing on the Snake River. When it got dark we made a fire, but as we were sitting around it, all the park lights suddenly went out. Aside from our little fire, it was pitch black. We put out the fire and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. The moon hadn't risen yet. And we laid on the grass. Have you ever done that somewhere where there's no light from the city? In the pitch black you can see the stars spread out across the sky. And they're not just pinpoints of

light. I remember having a sense of the depth of space. There, for the first time I saw the Milky Way, just as it was painted in that Hiawatha book from my childhood. I think we all just lay there for a good hour, watching the stars. And I remember thinking that this is what the shepherds that first Christmas night must have been looking up at—until the angels appeared with their bright light to tell them that something even brighter had just come into the world. And I thought, too, of the magi and the mysterious star, blazing in the night sky, that led them to Jesus.

It was that night, seeing the beauty and the grandeur of the stars that it suddenly made sense to me how people in the ancient world ended up making so much of the stars. We hardly ever look up. There's no point. Even here, the light from our own town, not to mention the light from Vancouver on the horizon spoils the sky—and that's when there are no clouds, a rare day in our part of the world. But those ancient people had nothing else to look at and every reason to look up. The unspoiled night sky was as beautiful and as awe-inspiring as a view of the ocean or of a snow-capped mountain would be in the day. And so they got ideas. Those stars, so grand, must be important. And they connected them with their gods and heroes. They got ideas about how those stars in the sky governed their lives—or if not theirs, then at least the lives of kings and nations.

By the time of the magi, that sort of thing had become a science and the magi were the experts. Despite what the song says, they weren't "kings", but they were men of high repute and status in their society. They came from the east—maybe Persia or Arabia, but most likely Babylon, where the Jews had spent their exile and where many of them chose to stay as their brethren returned to rebuild Jerusalem. The astrologers in Babylon would have known of the Jews and maybe even the Jewish scriptures and they saw this "star"—a comet? A

nova? A planetary conjunction? It's hard to say, but something about it caught their attention and shook them to the core. Something about it said that a king—maybe even the Messiah promised by the Jewish prophets—had been born in Israel. And so they left. So certain were they that this king really had been born that they carried costly, kingly gifts with them.

Let's look at our Gospel from Matthew again. Chapter 2, verses 1-4:

Now 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 assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

Herod styled himself "King of the Jews" and had been on the throne of Judaea for some twenty-five years. But Herod wasn't Jewish. He was Idumean—a descendant of Esau's people. He was a puppet king, put in place by the Romans. And his people had no love for him. He married a Jew and he engaged in a massive project to renovate and upgrade the temple, but none of that convinced the Jews that he was one of them or that he was looking out for their interests. He was wicked and unpredictable. As we'd see if our Gospel carried on a bit further, he had no qualms about murdering a dozen or twenty baby boys in Bethlehem, just to be sure this so-called king the magi said had been born there didn't one day become a problem for him.

Did the magi know all of this about Herod? When they showed up in his court to ask about this king the stars had foretold, were they as confused as he was? The Jews already had a king, right? Or did they know all about

Herod and was there something, perhaps just a little bit, gloating when they came to this pretender to ask where the real king was? We don't know. But Herod was troubled, Matthew says. Herod was ruling a powder keg. The Scriptures promised that the Lord's Messiah would one day come to set all to rights and to the rule the nations in his name. The Jews had been expecting him for a long time, but in Herod's time the expectation had reached fever-pitch. Things had gone from bad to worse. It was one of those times when people couldn't possibly imagine things getting any worse—even though they would get much worse about seventy years later—but desperate times like that get people thinking that surely the Lord will intervene any day now. Surely, he won't let things continue as they are. And so as they did back in the days when they were slaves in Egypt, they cried out to the Lord in expectation.

Herod would have none of that, but he saw it every day—the people praying for a king who would throw down both the Romans and him with them. And now these magi from the east turn up. The stars have proclaimed the birth of a king and have led them to his doorstep. That wasn't a good sign. And yet as much as Herod knew his people's desire for a Messiah, had no idea what the Scriptures actually said about the one who was to come. So he summons the men who did, the priests and the scribes. And the authorities on the Bible quote to him from the prophet Micah:

**“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.”** (Matthew 2:6)

The Bible scholars point Herod to nearby Bethlehem. He was probably thinking that this made sense.

Bethlehem, after all, was the city of David and a lot of people thought that the Messiah was going to be sort of a super, bigger-than-life David. How seriously did Herod take this? It's hard to say. He took it seriously enough that he had all the baby boys in Bethlehem murdered, but that's the sort of thing he'd do on a whim. He decreed the murder of the elders of Jericho in the event of his death so that there would be people crying at his funeral. Whatever the case, Herod schemes a plan. Look at verses 7 and 8:

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.”

“That I may worship him.” My money is on the magi not really knowing much about Herod, since they take him at his word and go off with every intention of reporting back once they find the child. And find him they did. Matthew goes on:

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.

Matthew says that they fell down and worshiped the child. The Greek word he uses describes the way in which a subject would bow or prostrate himself before someone with great authority—like a king. It's a visually powerful act of submission, making

oneself vulnerable while literally placing oneself as the feet of another.

Why would they do that? If they were just coming to see a king, they might bring gifts and they'd probably do some bowing. I expect that when they entered King Herod's presence they bowed low and maybe even brought him gifts of some kind. But when they find Jesus, they don't treat him as foreign king merely to be honoured. They treat him as if he were their own king—a king to whom they offer costly gifts and before whom they bow in submission and adoration. Why did they do this? Well, the simple answer is that it's not every king whose birth is heralded by a great star in the sky. As astrologers they knew that there was something different about this king. But I suspect that these magi knew something of the Scriptures. Apparently they'd never read Malachi, but it seems that they knew something of the Jewish belief in a Messiah who would come to rule the world and to set all to rights. And now the heavens themselves had moved to signal, to herald this king. Something about the star tipped them off that it was *this* king who had been born. And so, in their act of humble obeisance, they submit themselves to and honour not just the baby, Jesus, but in some sense acknowledge the God of Israel who had done what he had promised long before. These foreigners, these Gentiles are amongst the first to witness the faithfulness of Israel's God and to worship him because of it.

What's Matthew getting at in telling this story? That's the real question. Brothers and Sisters, Matthew's point here is to highlight the kingship of Jesus. And not only that, but more specifically, that even though Jesus is King of the Jews, his rule isn't limited to the Jewish people. Earlier in the chapter, Matthew brings a number of Old Testament prophecies to our attention, for example, Isaiah 7:14 which speaks of a child born to herald the coming of the Lord to deliver his

people. Now, no one before Matthew had ever made a connection between that passage in Isaiah and the coming of the Messiah. But the connection here with the magi would have been an obvious one, especially considering that Matthew was writing to a mostly Jewish audience who knew the Scriptures well. They knew Psalm 72, which speaks of the coming King, saying:

**His dominion shall be also from one sea to the other,
and from the River unto the world's end.
They that dwell in the wilderness shall kneel before him;
his enemies shall lick the dust.
The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall give presents;
the kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring gifts.
All kings shall fall down before him;
all nations shall do him service.**
(Psalm 72:8-11)

They also know the words of our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 60:

**Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
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 carried on the hip.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and exult,
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,**

**the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
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.** (Isaiah 60:1-6)

The Messiah was to usher in a rule, not just over Israel, but a rule that would draw the nations and their kings—a rule that would set all of creation to rights. And here at Jesus' birth these magi from the East prefigure his coming rule and kingdom. When I read of the magi making their way to Herod's palace to ask where this king was to be born I can't help but think of Zechariah's prophecy of the Messiah's kingdom:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zechariah 8:23)

The magi laid hold of Herod's robe and cried, "We have heard that God of Israel has made good on his promise to visit his people and to send his king. Tell us where he is!" But, of course, Herod was not a Jew and cared nothing about the faithfulness of God. And yet in his faithfulness, the Lord led these foreigners to his Son that they might know his faithfulness themselves.

Matthew hints at this theme throughout his Gospel. Jesus didn't seek out Gentiles in his ministry. Jesus was Israel's saviour and Israel's judge. We too often short-circuit the biblical narrative in some of the ways we speak of Jesus as the saviour of the world. Jesus came to judge his own people and to save those amongst them who would follow him in faith as a new Israel, a new people of God was

formed to fulfil the Lord's promises. But Israel was judged and a remnant saved *so that* the nations, *so that* the Gentiles, *so that* people like you and I two thousand years later, would see in Jesus the faithfulness of God as he visited his people. Some of my ancestors were Jews. But some of my ancestors worshiped Donar and Balder and Wodan in the forests of pagan Germany. My Portuguese ancestors worshipped similar Asturian gods. Silent, unknowable, and capricious gods. And then the gospel came and they heard of this God of Israel who made himself known by being born as one of us, who visited his people to judge and to save just as he had promised, and like those magi they bowed, they knelt, they prostrated themselves in faithful submission to this God who hears and who answers and who is full of love, and mercy, and grace, this God who will as surely fulfil his promise to set all Creation to rights as he has fulfilled his promises to his own people.

The magi, along with every other Gentile who has submitted to Jesus, prefigure the fulfilment of the Lord's promises about Jesus that we see in Revelation 21, at the very end of the story:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. (Revelation 21:22-26)

On that day, the light that came into the world's darkness will overcome everything else and by his light the nations will walk. Kings will come, like those magi, bringing their glory.

That's a funny way to put it. God is the one with the glory, isn't he? But John's point here is that as the kings of the earth bring their glory into presence of Jesus, God himself is glorified. He has fulfilled his promises and even the most important people on earth acknowledge him and worship him for it.

But it starts small. It starts with these magi from the East, men whose names have been lost to history. Jesus himself will be rejected by most of his own people. Pilate, the representative of the greatest king the world had known in those days, put him to death on a cross. And once again the heavens spoke. Where a star appeared at his birth, the sun itself was darkened at his death. And in the darkness we hear one small voice, the voice of a Roman soldier, Matthew says, declaring, "Truly, this was the son of God." But the Good News of the King, crucified and risen, has spread. Brothers and Sisters, the Epiphany story of the magi reminds of who Jesus is. The baby born and laid in the manger on Christmas is the promised King. The Epiphany story gives us a glimpse of God's faithfulness and points us to the final fulfilment of his promises. Hear the Word this morning and go out into the world with your faith renewed. No matter how dark the days, no matter how wicked the kings or presidents or primes ministers, Jesus reigns. Proclaim the good news. Shine his light in the darkness. And know as the angel declared to John:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 11:15)

Let's pray: O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith, may at last behold your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns

with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*