

The Brightness of His Dawn
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

“Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

By and large the Bible has no use for astrologers. In a particularly pointed outburst, Isaiah says of Babylon:

Stand fast in your enchantments, and your many sorceries...perhaps you may be able to succeed, perhaps you may inspire terror...let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars, and at each new moon predict what shall befall you. See, they are like stubble, the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before!

Likewise Paul warns the Colossians to stay away from those who observe festivals and new moons. “These are only a shadow of what is to come,” Paul writes, “but the substance belongs to Christ.” In these and other passages, Scripture is clear that the human propensity to consult the stars and new moons for a revelation of life’s meaning and direction both misunderstands the purpose of these heavenly bodies within creation and tempts the human mind to worship the stars rather than the One who created them.

“The only exception which calls for notice,” Karl Barth wrote nervously, “is the remarkable one of the story of the wise men from the East, of whom it is said uncritically that they had seen in their country the star of the new born king of Israel and had come to worship Him, and that this star had in some way led them until finally it stood still over the place where the little child was.”

Barth’s concern, in concert with Isaiah and Paul, was that we might take this story as warrant to look to the stars for our destiny and miss the manger by a mile...or by nine miles to be exact. In Barth’s time, those who believed God was revealed in the stars and so in nature were also taken in by the claims of Hitler to be God’s true revelation. Ignorant or unaware or indifferent concerning the scandalously specific light of Christ that rules merely human surmise about God out of order, German Christians had only their wits by which to test the spirits: If God could speak through a star, then why not through Adolf Hitler? Therefore Barth quickly adds: “This [exception] does not mean that [Matthew] justifies the action of the Magi or gives an invitation or even permission to imitate it...The exception to the rule only confirms that it is not the normal function of stars to give such signs.”

Nevertheless, we are here to business with this exception to the rule on the day after the twelfth night of Christmas, when the church celebrates the manifestation of God’s presence to the Gentiles--to you and to me. Therefore the star compels us to ask a question of ourselves that never need be asked of the people who are God’s by inheritance: What in the world has led you to Bethlehem that you might bow down and worship him? I do believe that the story of the magi has something to tell us about the coincidence of our seeking God in the stars and our being found of God before the mystery of Christ’s birth.

In the first place, because they are Gentiles, Matthew uses the wise men to lead us, precisely us, to Bethlehem. To be sure, Matthew laces his Gospel with links to Old Testament texts for the sake of his own people seeing in Jesus the Messiah. But he writes this beginning knowing the end of the story--knowing the risen Christ will send the disciples out to baptize all nations: to baptize Gentiles. Because the church also reads the story of Jesus’ baptism on the first Sunday of the New Year, we would do well to remember that, unlike our Jewish brothers and sisters, we come to him by water rather than by our blood relations. One cannot be born a Christian! We respond to his

gracious claim upon our lives in the waters of baptism as the community claimed by grace alone welcomes us home. So Matthew begins his Gospel with Gentile astrologers from Persia.

But there is something else we share with the wise men: they were, in their day, as most of us are in our day, empiricists. Specialists in medicine, religion, astronomy and astrology, they were highly educated men who reasoned their way to the truth. We might liken them today to a department of theoretical physicists observing the probability field of the heavens by way of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Schrodinger's quantum-mechanical wave-function equations. "We did not observe the star to be at Bethlehem" they might have said in an interview with the *Science Times* "because that happens to be where it was; that is where it was *because we made the observation.*" The position of the star, essayist John Barth writes, "is 'merely' a field of probabilities until someone observes it, whereupon its 'wave function collapses' and it may be said to *have a position,*" may be said to stop and stay! Or as physicist John Wheeler explains, "The observer is as essential to the creation of the universe as the universe is to the creation of the observer." The Magi were seeking the God who sought them seeking him. You and I are merely a field of probabilities (lost in the cosmos) until God seeks us seeking God and we exclaim, "I am found of thee."

Two curious details in Matthew's second chapter bolster such an understanding of the star's significance to our own search: in spite of its brightness, apparently no one other than the Magi noticed the star, suggesting that they alone were in the world seeking the God who sought them seeking him. As Joanna Harader noticed, "If all it took was a star to compel a person to Bethlehem, the magi would arrive to see a multitude bowing down before the young king. Instead there is no one else." The star was God's means of seeking precisely them.

But equally curious is the fact that the star was not enough to get them all the way to Bethlehem. Led only as far as Jerusalem, they arrived in need of a text to interpret the star's meaning. Without hesitation, the chief priests and scribes provided the text that would take them the rest of the way: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Yet even a text is no guarantee anyone will make it to the Christ child's cradle. As Harader goes on to observe, in spite of Micah's prophetic direction to the magi, "...the priests and scribes of Jerusalem...[who provided the text]...are unaware that the Messiah has been born." Instead, their quick response to Herod's query suggests that the homage they are presently paying to Herod is preventing them from making the nine mile journey to Bethlehem. You see, when you have a king, you are in no hurry to look for another. Also when religion is what you believe in instead of God, revelation is a threat to things as they are rather than a promise of God's reign breaking into time.

So apparently the third and decisive condition necessary if the Magi are going to be led to him who was born King of the Jews is God's redeeming purposes in human history. As one theologian put it: "There is no road from [mortals] to God, no way of gaining knowledge or union with God through human experience or through reflection on that experience." The star and the text are nothing if God does not act. "There is a road from God to [mortals]," he goes on. "That road was taken in the incarnation." The significant journey in this story is not yours or mine or the magi's, but the journey of God coming toward us in Jesus Christ.

"When they saw that the star had stopped," Matthew tells us of the magi about to be visited by revelation, "they were overwhelmed with joy." On this morning after the twelfth night of Christmas, may you find yourselves overwhelmed with joy at the coincidence of being found of God who was long beforehand with your soul in Christ, and who even now sends you by star and shepherds and angels and magi—by the story Scripture tells—a mere nine miles down the road to Bethlehem where God has traveled to know and be known by precisely you. Amen.