

Sermon – January 2, 2022  
“A Star in the East”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 2:1-12

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these word. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor while we labor on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning, everyone! Welcome to 2022! Happy Secular New Year! As we enter into this new year, let us remember that as long as it is today, we are to continue to provoke each other to love and it is today again. My prayer for us is that in this coming year we will discover new ways to provoke each other in love, from praying over one another to sharing insights in God's word with each other and loving our neighbors with the extravagant love of God. I hope many of us have made spiritual new year's resolutions and are seeking new disciplines to extend the reading of God's word that we experienced during Advent through the rest of this year. Does anyone know what time it is? On my watch it is January 2nd of 2022 at XX:XX a.m. On the Christian calendar, the one that counts, it is Epiphany Sunday, the day we celebrate the coming of the wise men to find and worship the Christ child and give him gifts for a king (Epiphany is actually January 6th).

Now, in case you have missed Christmas, let me give a bit of background. Mary has given birth to the Son of God in Bethlehem, and she and Joseph have named the child Jesus, meaning God saves. Light has come into the world, noticed only by shepherds who were tipped off to the birth by a group of angels praising God and saying, “See—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11, NRSV) Now the shepherds have told everyone they met about this good news, but who would believe a shepherd when it comes to seeing angels and what do they know about babies? Israel has not responded to the arrival of the Lord among them, and it seems that Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus are living in Bethlehem, having moved from a stable to a house. All is quiet and all is calm.

Somewhere far off to the east on the same night Jesus was born, Maji, those who watch the stars and seek to understand life through the motion of the stars, were also given a message. A new star, unique in nature, not known to them, rose and testified to the star watchers of the arrival of a king. Not just any king, but a king the heavens declared so this must be a divine king. These wise men were astrologers, a practice that was unacceptable in the early church as it did not give glory to God but saw the heavens as in control of the lives and destiny of people. And by the way, this practice is still inconsistent with Christianity today as it places that which is created in the place of the creator. Yet, it is to these watchers, in a language they would understand, God chose to speak and alert to the birth of a new king, a divine king whom the heavens declared. This is the Star in the East on Christmas morning. We should notice that there is no mention of this star in Israel; it seems to have been visible to those who watched the sky that night far off in the east. Having seen the star at its rising, these wise men begin searching for a kingdom that is expecting a king whose arrival is to be hailed by a star.

We should be aware that the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, was translated into Greek 300+ years before Jesus’ birth, so it was available for those who could read Greek to search. The wise men would be educated men who would most likely be able to read Greek. And if we assume they began to search the literature of the existing kingdoms of the known world, at some point in their reading of this translation, known as the Septuagint, they would come to Numbers 24:17. This is from the prophet Balaam’s fourth oracle about Israel, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near— a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel ...” Here in the scriptures of Israel, the wise men would find a connection between the rising of a

star in the east and a king to rise in Israel. With that information, they decide they need to go and honor this new king, and so they prepare and journey to Jerusalem to find this newborn king whose birth was marked by a star rising in the east. We will learn later that this process takes about two years, information that will be deadly for the sons of Bethlehem.

The wise men arrive in Jerusalem. Notice that there is no indication in the text that they are following a star or have continued to see the star they saw at its rising. They come to Jerusalem expecting to find an ongoing celebration for a new king, only to find Herod as king with no young child and no other connection to any newborn king. Herod is not in the line of kings of Judah; he is a king set in place by Rome. The coming of a true king, one from God, would bring great fear to Herod. In Israel's history those connected kings who are replaced by a new king are not treated well. If we look at Jehu's actions toward Ahab's descendants where Jehu kills every child, family member, priest, and political associate of Ahab's when Jehu becomes king, we can understand the fear that this news might bring to Herod. The people are also afraid because such a disruption in the leadership of Israel would bring Rome's armies to enforce the peace of the emperor, so people also are filled with fear and not great joy at the prospect of a new king rising in Israel.

Herod may not be a king in the line of Judah, but he is wise enough to send for the chief priests, those who lead the 24 divisions that minister in the temple, and for the scribes who copy and teach the Law to ask them where scripture testifies to a king being born. Those who know the Word of God so well are able to give the town of Bethlehem as the place from which is to rise a new king in the line of Judah. Notice that when Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem to find the new king that he does not send them to find a king, but Messiah and Lord. Herod is seeking to remain king and to keep kingship in his family and will not even say there is another coming king.

The wise men are sent to Bethlehem with the request from Herod to return and let him know where the child is found so that he might also honor this new king. The wise men set out for Bethlehem, which is only about seven miles from Jerusalem. As they go, the "star" appears to them and in a very unstar-like manner of movement leads them to the house where Jesus and Mary are found. This leading of the star to a house gives us good evidence that what they are following is less a star as we know stars and more an angel speaking to them in a language they will understand. And the wise men go into the house the star leads them to, find the child, fall

down before the child, and worship him. Those who are not from Israel are the first to worship Jesus. Those who did not know God, but follow a sign in God's creation faithfully, respond to the divine child by falling to the ground and worshipping God. This is the response of the created to the creator, worship. Those who witnessed the sign in the heavens come and worship the newborn king and then they testify to the child's kingship by giving gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The wise men may already not trust Herod's desire to honor the child in a good manner, but they are also spoken to by God in a means they understand. They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

It will take a few days for Herod to realize that the wise men have left by another route, no doubt moving quickly to leave Herod's domain. And we should realize that Herod uses the information he has gained from the wise men about the time of the star's rising to send his troops to kill all of the male infants in and around Bethlehem who are two years old and younger. It is the first attempt for the leadership of Israel to kill Jesus, a foreshadowing of events to come. Joseph and Mary and Jesus are not in Bethlehem when the troops arrive, as Joseph is commanded in a dream to flee to Egypt, and once again, without hesitation, Joseph obeys God and flees, protecting Jesus. In spite of the light that has come into the world, evil is alive and acting to maintain its grip on the world and remove the threat of a divine child to evil's control in the world.

As we think about this event in the unfolding story of God's plan for salvation, we will find many places to dwell on what happens. We might think of the gifts the wise men give and connect their gifts to the giving of gifts we exchange at Christmas. We might struggle with the killing of the children by Herod and wonder why evil is at work even as God is working and light has come into the world. One observation we should catch among the many possibilities is that it is not those who know God who come to worship the newborn king, but those who do not know God but understand the sign of a star rising in the east. They who watch the stars come and fall down before a child and worship the divine king. Jesus draws all people to him. The first to come are the wise men who may not know God but who correctly interpret the rising of a star in the east that marks the coming of a king testified to by the heavens, and in response they come. This is the world beyond the people of Israel coming to a king who will welcome, love, and die for them so that they might be reconciled to God.

There is a saying that emerges each year about this time, “Wise men still seek him!” Yes, the world is still seeking a divine king who will lead them into the kingdom of God. Yet they, like the wise men, are seeking the Christ child in places where they are comfortable, often places that are difficult for us as Christ followers to see their seeking, to recognize the sign they are seeing and following, and to interrupt the books they are searching as they seek Jesus. I think we struggle as Christians to understand the signs those in the world are seeing and they are following to bring them to worship a divine king. The rapid rise of fast-growing religions such as pantheism or wicca is an example of people searching in the wrong places for a divine king. They, like the wise men, are looking to other things created by God for a sign, for hope, and for answers. The Church is no longer a sign for searchers pointing them to the highway of God, either because we have failed to make the words of God available to them or because evil has so clouded the church in our sins that only our failures are found spoken in the world communications. Whatever the reason, some obstacle is keeping the world from seeing the sign we hold in our lives pointing to the Christ child and the love of God. We, as believers, are to be their sign, seeking to be those whose lives are so radically different and present in the world that those searching in empty places for God can see Christ in the love we have for each other and for them, extravagant love, love that cannot be missed, love that is like the witness of a star rising in the east, love that comes from God and is among the world through our lives. When the wise men left Herod, they again saw the star and were overwhelmed with joy. The star leads them to the house and Mary and the child. The wise men’s response is to fall down and worship this child whom the heavens declared to them in the places they were searching for answers. We are to be stars for our family, friends, neighbors, and community, stars who are extending the extravagant love of Jesus to them so that they may witness the message of God in our lives among them in the places they gather, in the places they search in the world for answers to God questions. In those places, we are not to become of the world, but are to be a radical, extravagantly loving source of love. Keep provoking others to love, dare to be a star in someone’s life by loving them. When our love fails to lead those we meet, let us not fall aside, but love more extravagantly. Let us not just be a sign that rises in the east, but one that has the courage to walk into the world with the radical love of God, speaking to them in a language they can understand that they may be led to Jesus.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we confess that we have not been stars in our homes, communities, and in the world. Guide us, Jesus, into new expressions of extravagant love for others that we might become a star, a guide for them to follow to you that they might freely worship you as the answer to their search for the divine presence they seek. Amen.*