

Sermon – January 7, 2024
“His 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 open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out to fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Happy New Year, Happy Epiphany, and good morning. The Christmas season has ended, and we have entered the season of Epiphany.

Let's test our memories this morning: If I say, "Here I am the servant of the Lord," what would your response be? "*Let it be with me according to your word.*" Those words, as many will recall, were Mary's response to the angel Gabriel when he brought her news of the Lord's favor and that she was to bring forth a holy child. Mary's response should also be our hearts' desire to respond with in our hearts as Jesus calls us into his mission. There are many witnesses to Jesus in the Christmas story and today we come to the last. We have encountered Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, angels, and shepherds as witnesses during Advent and Christmas. Now we come to the last of the witnesses to Jesus' birth. These witnesses are outside of the little groups

that were called directly into Jesus' birth by God. These witnesses are those who see the heavenly witness, let's call it a star, and respond from a distant land, from another place in the world. They are not part of the inner group around Jesus who walked with Mary as she carried and birthed Jesus. They are outsiders, and angels do not come to them with a message from God.

Think about the birth of Jesus and the way it happens. Mary, Joseph, and some in Bethlehem are aware that Jesus is born, and his family stays in Bethlehem and settles into a house. They become part of the Bethlehem community, and all is quiet and calm for two years. Then everything seems to go crazy. Wise men show up in Jerusalem asking for the king of the Jews. They claim to have seen a star rise in the east two years ago, a star they believe marked the birth of a divine king and, after seeing it, studying, and learning, they are now searching for the child. Their search has brought them to Jerusalem where they think the child king, who has been born to be the long-expected king of the Jews, one who is to rule the nations, is to be found. They come to Jerusalem expecting to find this child the heavens proclaimed, only to find a very different situation. The ruler in Jerusalem is not a king in the line of David; he is a ruler by way of knowing the right people in Rome. He is cruel, ruthless, and has no new child who might be the king the wise men seek. We are not sure what source of knowledge was found by the wise men that brought them to Jerusalem in search for a king of the Jews. The Old Testament had been translated into Greek hundreds of years before their arrival, so that it is a possibility. They may have read the prophecy found in the book of Micah that led them to Jerusalem or they may be responding to rumors throughout the lands around Jerusalem that a king would one day rise there who would rule the nations. We do not know the source of knowledge that brings them searching in Jerusalem for the king of the Jews. We do know they come to a sitting ruler who will even kill his own children if they threaten his rule. Their arrival brings trouble to the people and to Herod. Their arrival and mission create a situation in Jerusalem and we have trouble in Jerusalem. not like the trouble in River City, trouble that begins with a capital "T" that rhymes with "P" and that stands for pool. This is trouble that comes when you challenge a ruler who is ruthless in protecting his rule against all threats. Notice Herod does not meet openly with the wise men. He may be keeping from even acknowledging that they are present, as he might think that to acknowledge their mission would be to underline that he is not a legitimate king of Israel. He does call together the chief priests, the 24 men who lead the 24 sections of priests that serve in the temple, and the scribes, those who know the scriptures, and he asks them where such a

ruler in Israel is to be born. The groups of experts give him scriptural support for Bethlehem as the place the coming Messiah is to be born. Herod sends out the wise men after a secret meeting with them at night, telling them to go and find the child. Herod will not send them out to find a true king, just a child he also wants to “worship.”

Our wise men go on the road to Bethlehem, some seven miles away, a quick camel ride compared to the journey they have been on over the last two years. And as they go, they see the “star” again. The “star” leads them to the house they are searching for by stopping over the house. The star, which they recognize as the star they saw at its rising two years ago, goes before them and when it stops over a house in Bethlehem, they have joy. The joy that comes to the wise men is not happiness at the end of their journey, but joy that comes from recognizing God’s grace and provision with the end of their search for the divine child. It is not clear what the sequence of events is with their arrival in Bethlehem and their knowledge of the house they seek. They may pitch camp and wait for daylight before going and knocking on the door to the house. Scripture tells us at some point that they enter and worship the child the heavens have proclaimed as king. Their worship or homage is to fall on their face, to kiss the ground before a divine ruler, to give worship to a great king, the king whom heavens proclaim, who is but a young child. Their worship is not a coming-to-a-church-service, sitting-in-a-pew, and going-home type of worship. Their worship of the baby is a fall-on-your-face-in-reverence-to-a-king-whose-birth-the-heavens-testify-to type of worship. Their worship is a worship-by-those-who-are-from-other-nations worship of the king of the Jews. Theirs is the worship of the divine by those who have searched for him. And they give gifts to honor the king. Gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts fit for a king. The gifts the wise men give are for a king; even their gifts testify to the kingship of this child. They have no doubts based on where the child is born or found (the small town of Bethlehem, a house not a palace). They worship the king whom the heavens witness to as king. The star they follow is the witness from heaven that guides them. Herod does not come to worship. Mary and Joseph will flee as Herod comes or rather sends troops to kill the child. The chief priests do not come looking for the child to worship him. They may be afraid of Herod or filled with disbelief of wise men from another place. They may set aside foreign wise men as not those whom God would reveal the birth of such a child to. Yet Jesus is worshiped as king of the Jews by these wise men. At Jesus’ crucifixion, a sign will be placed over the cross with these same words, “The King of the Jews.” A star, or heavenly object or heavenly being or angel, is a

witness to Jesus' birth. We don't know what the "star" is and astronomers cannot connect it to an event. It moves unlike any star we understand. It is unique from other stars. Yet it gives wondrous light, and wise men receive its message. It leads, points out, and stops over a house to bring joy to those who follow its guidance that they might worship a divine king. Yet it is a witness to those who watch the stars and who come to worship one to whom the heavens speak as having been born. The wise men come as witnesses from other nations to the birth of a king, the king who will rule the nations.

When I think about wise men from another nation who know nothing of Israel's God seeing a star and making the decision to find out where the king is so that they could go and worship him, I wonder what a parallel messenger for people around us would be that would speak into their lives and draw them to Jesus. When I wonder about this, I typically turn first to the physical. I wonder, if we added a star shining from the steeple of our church over the nativity scene out front, would the world notice and come to worship the child? Would they see the addition to our display and begin to wonder and search for the reason we put up a light? I wonder, if there were a star in the east on Christmas morning, would those who drive by take notice, stop, and come in, seeking the reason for our new light? I am sure many have tried that approach and those who drive by remain unaware or unconcerned. Those who drive by our doors seem to have their own ideas and thoughts about Christmas, and a bright star shining over our display, I am afraid, would not influence them to come and worship the king of the Jews. So, we have the questions to struggle with such as, "What is the star that people in our community would notice and would influence them to seek the one it represents and come and worship the king of the Jews? How are we to be used by Christ to shine the light of Christ into the lives of the people in our community? How are we to become a star in their lives?" I wonder if we are "star" material that points the way to the king of the Jews, the child the heavens proclaimed as king. I wonder what it would take to draw those sitting in darkness into the light. Do we wonder about similar things? Are we in some way "star" material? As we move forward in the year, we will hear the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness calling people to repentance as he makes a highway for the Lord. I wonder if we are to be wilderness voices. And as I wonder about these things, I finally get to the point of confessing that I do not know the answer to these questions. Another cycle of Advent, Christmas, and now Epiphany has come and gone, and little has changed. Many of us may have been blessed in those seasons to experience the love of Jesus

in new and exciting ways that we were blessed to be part of during these seasons. For me, one of those moments was the carrying of light out into the Christmas Eve night by people who came to worship the king of the Jews. Maybe we encountered some new aspect in the events of the seasons and have grasped some new meaning of these seasons that points to Jesus in a way we had never realized before, and we should give praise to God for those moments. But the world in silent darkness waits for the coming of light, a new star to shine into their awareness. As I contemplate these questions, I am led back to the simple realization that I do not have answers to these questions. I can only come before the king of the Jews and ask him to help me, change me, and lead me that I might be used by him, that I might in some way become a star and shine the light of Christ into the darkness. Let our prayers in the season of Epiphany, in light of our own worship of the king of the Jews, become "Help us, change us and lead us that we might take the light of Christ to those who wait in darkness." We, who have witnessed the child, who are now witnesses to a new king, should also seek to be stars in this place. We should prayerfully seek to be those through whom Christ shines light into the darkness of the world. Let us come together and have communion with Jesus. Let us worship him and then let us go out into the world to be light, to carry light to those who yet reside in darkness. Help us, Jesus, to understand how to be witnesses to you in all of the places you send us. Help us to become stars and go with you into all of the places you are waiting for a follower to take your holy light.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, let us encounter you in this Holy Meal we are about to receive at your table. Lord, in the breaking of the bread and giving of blood, change us into those who know how to be light that can be carried into the dark places around us. Help us, lead us, and change us to be bearers of Good News to people who sit in darkness. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.