

"Our Star"  
Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2019

The Epiphany of Our Lord

What a joy it is to celebrate the Epiphany of Our Lord! Since Epiphany has a fixed date of January 6, we only get to do this every five or six years. That's really a shame for the story of the Epiphany is an exciting and intriguing one. You have the mysterious visitors from the east, Magi, who were sages, seers, and astronomers, searching for a king who had recently been born. You have the rare and valuable gifts they brought for the King: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You have the palace intrigue under the madman King Herod, the Great who is insanely attempting to protect his throne from all challengers – real and imagined. However, the most well-known aspect of the Epiphany, the "star" of the show (pun fully intended) is the great star which the Magi were following.

This magnificent and mystical astronomical occurrence has been called, "the Star of Bethlehem." People have been fascinated with this star throughout the centuries. It plays a prominent role in all of our Nativity scenes. It is referred to often in our Christmas songs and hymns (i.e. We Three Kings of Orient Are). It is a symbol of the Christmas story which is understood even by unbelievers.

What was it? There are many speculations. Many see it as a miraculous creation of God specifically for this occasion. Others think it was a natural event used by God for His purposes – a huge comet or the confluence of two or more planets in the night sky which had a symbolic meaning for those (like the Magi from the East) who looked for meanings in the stars. Johannes Kepler came up with the theory that, at the time of Jesus' birth, two planets, Jupiter and Saturn, came very close in the night sky. Astrologers understood Jupiter to be the king of the night sky and Saturn was the planet representing Israel. So, astrologers interpreted Jupiter coming toward Saturn in the night sky as meaning a king was coming to Israel.

Do you ever get jealous of the people in the first Christmas story and the experiences they had? Common shepherds got to hear angels sing. Gentile astrologers got to see one of the most impressive astronomical events in the history of the world. Do you ever wish that we could have our own special star upon which to gaze? Not only would the beauty be breathtaking, but imagine having this big bright shining light to guide you to Jesus and to illuminate the way to follow Him. After all, that's what it did for the Magi. Or, did it?

Despite the fact that much of our hymnody, our traditions, and our assumptions say that the star led the Magi directly to Jesus, this technically isn't the case. The Magi were able to gain some knowledge from the star, but the star leads them to the wrong place and the wrong King; to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem and to King Herod and not Jesus. They are able to get only so far with the help of the star. Why is this?

The plain truth is that no one is able to find Jesus on his own and by himself, whether they have a star to guide them or not. Our sinful rebellion against God and His holy will prevent us from doing that. It is not as if our individual sins lead us on wild goose chases and down rabbit holes which keep us from finding God. It is much worse

than that. Sin is an inherited condition which not only separates us from God, condemns us to death and hell, but also prevents us from finding our way back to Him.

The Word of God has some very strong unequivocal statements on the subject. The Bible says that, before knowing Jesus, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins.” (Ephesians 2:1) Dead people obviously can find nothing because they are dead. They can neither reach out for a source of life, even if it were offered to them, nor can they find God, the source of life. When you’re dead you do nothing because of your deadness.

As far as finding God, knowing God, and trusting in God on our own, the Bible says this is impossible. The Word of God says, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14) Any information we have about who God is and what he has done is immediately rejected by us for it all seems so foolish.

But there’s more. It’s not just that we are dead in sin which is very passive, nor that we are unable to accept the things of God which is very understandable, we are not neutral in this whole conflict. The Word of God says, “The sinful mind is hostile to God.” (Romans 8:7) We are not even trying to find God on our own. In fact, we are running the other way.

While the star was able to help the Wise Men come to the general vicinity of Jesus, they were not able to find Jesus, know Jesus, believe in Jesus, or worship Jesus. Even though we don’t have such a star, there are things which are able to help us come close to God as Savior. God’s creation can help us know the existence of God as a Creator. Our consciences can help us know the existence of God as a Moral Being who distinguishes between right and wrong. In fact, the Bible says that people should know that God exists and are without excuse if they deny it. St. Paul writes in the book of Romans, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that been made. So they are without excuse.” [Romans 1:19-20]) While it is good to know that God exists, neither creation nor conscience is able to help us find Jesus, know Jesus, believe in Jesus, or worship Jesus.

Now, you may be thinking, “Wait a minute. We know from the Bible that the Magi did find Jesus. But you’re saying that it wasn’t because of the star that led them? Then how did they find Jesus?” Their human logic assumed that a new King would be born in a palace in the capital city so they stopped at Jerusalem to ask directions from King Herod. Not only was this the wrong destination, but the palace of a paranoid king like Herod was a bad place to stop and ask for directions.

Yet Herod, as evil as he was, served the advancement of the Gospel unwittingly. He called together the chief priests and teachers of the Law and asked them to find the birthplace of this new King, the Christ, the Savior of the world. They didn’t look out the window and study the star in the sky. They didn’t try to think of a logical place for the birthplace of the Messiah. They went to the one true and accurate guide to lead the Magi to Jesus: the Holy Scriptures.

The chief priests and teachers of the Law found the prophecy from the book of Micah which declared that Bethlehem the birthplace of the Messiah. With this Word of God, the Magi were able to then find the Baby Jesus, received faith in the Baby Jesus, and worship the Baby Jesus. None of this would have been possible without the Word of God.

Now, for those of you who would like to have the same star that the Magi had, you do. As the Magi were able to know the existence of the true God by the outward circumstances of the star, but only able to find the Savior, Jesus Christ, through the leading of the Word of God, so we are able to know the existence of the true God through the proofs of creation and conscience, but are only able to find our Savior, Jesus Christ, through the leading of the Word of God. The Word of God shows us more than the existence of God or even the Law of God. The Word of God shows us God's attitude toward us and His actions on our behalf through Jesus Christ.

The Word of God shows us more than the birth of a Baby, even the Savior of the world. The Word of God shows us why this baby is born: because God loves us dearly and wants to redeem us from sin, death, and hell. The Word of God shows us that this Baby grew to be a man, took our sin upon Himself, and endured the wrath of God against sin and the punishment of God for sin by dying on a cross. The Word of God shows us that the Christ, who died, was also raised from death to life again. The star in the sky showed Magi that God existed and was coming to earth. The Word of God in our hands shows why God came to earth and what he has accomplished for us by His coming.

We continue to follow the "Star of Bethlehem" even today, but let us be clear on what that star is. The Magi followed a physical star which was not able to guide them all the way to Jesus. When they followed the star of the Word of God, they were able to follow it to find Jesus, received faith in Him, worship, and present their gifts in response to God's mercy and as a result of their faith.

We have that Star among us now: the Word of God. That star leads us to faith and new life in Holy Baptism. That star leads us to comfort and assurance through the forgiveness of sins in Divine Service. That star leads us to an understanding of the will of God and the strength to carry it out as we read and study the Word of God. In other words, through the star of the Word of God we receive all of the blessings which the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ came to give us.

Therefore, we follow our "star" much in the same way as the Magi followed their star. We pay attention to the star of the Word of God as the Magi did. They never ignored the star nor had a lackadaisical attitude toward the star. They intently and vigorously follow the star because of where it would lead. In the same way, we intently and vigorously follow the star which is the word of God where it leads, namely, to Jesus.

We go where the star of the Word of God goes in matters of faith and life. The Magi would never stray from the path of the star, even though the journey was difficult. They would never go right when the star went left or go left when they star went right. In the same way, in terms of what we are to believe and what we are to do, we never stray from the path which the star of the Word of God places before us for it illuminates

the way. As the psalmist says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Even though our journey is difficult with our faith being ridiculed and our morality being condemned, the star of the Word of God will always lead us in the right way.

Hopefully, our celebration of Epiphany of Our Lord did not ruin your perception of the most iconic symbol of the Epiphany, namely, the Star of Bethlehem. Nor, hopefully, did it make you desire to have a star like the Magi had. You don't need that star. You have one that is better. The Star of Bethlehem could lead the Magi close to Baby Jesus. However, close is not good enough. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand contains. The Star of the Word of God leads you directly to Jesus, creates saving faith, gives new life, and leads us home to Him in heaven. So, rejoice! We do have our star. How truly wonderful that is! Amen.