

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought 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 proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"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."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Right Star: Wrong Prophecy

Today I'm going to continue to use the "journey" metaphor in presenting my sermon, a sermon that piggybacks on last week's sermon about straying from the right path. Today we have two texts that fit together but not in the way you might expect, and today's texts may actually illustrate quite well the point that we are no different than our ancestors in the sense that we are just as blind as they were, and our blindness can have very tragic consequences. Today I hope that your eyes are opened to these texts, that you may recognize how easy it is for us to lose sight, so that you would be on guard, and teach your children to be on guard. And my prayer is that, as your eyes are opened, that you would see your path quite clearly amidst all the junk that lines the path that we want to walk, the path that both follows Jesus Christ and leads to Jesus Christ.

Last week we stopped in Jerusalem with these Wise Men, these Magi most likely from Iran (Persia, in those days), and it's quite interesting to me that they stopped in Jerusalem, and the text doesn't say that it's because the star stopped over Jerusalem; we read later that the star, which must be moving, stops over Bethlehem. So why did these Wise Men stop to make inquiries in Jerusalem, nine miles from Bethlehem? One idea put forth by Walter Bruggemann that I find quite intriguing, is that the Wise Men had read the Old Testament passage that we read this morning.ⁱ These were Wise Men, mind you, and Wise Men and Wise Women are wise because they take some time to learn about other people of other cultures or other religions. There was no great wall between them and Judea like the kind Donald Trump wants to construct on the U.S. – Mexican border. There was trade and travel and exchange of ideas – Matthew refers to these men as *Magi* who were followers of Zoroaster who was considered a great religious philosopher from Persia, so Matthew was clearly a pretty wise man who had some knowledge of neighboring cultures and their religions. And Bruggemann asserts that since these Magi are carrying gold and frankincense and stopping in Jerusalem that they were probably reading Isaiah and making the connection between his prophecy and the star they happened be following.

Because Isaiah really was prophesying about Jerusalem. You see around 600 B.C. Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians, who happened to be from the East, and a whole bunch of Jews were carried East into exile, but a few generations later some are allowed to return, and they return to this blown up, burned down, devastated, dilapidated, ruined city with no temple, no economy, no jobs...nothing. And here Isaiah recites this very hopeful poem:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

This poem is about the glory of Jerusalem, a city restored...no, not just restored but *elevated* into a magnificent city with a giant Temple and luxury condominiums. And this was the state of Jerusalem when the Wise Men caught sight of that star and began researching its meaning. It was a common belief back then that shifts in the heavens indicated the birth of a king, and if this star led them to the vicinity of Jerusalem, this magnificent, restored city, then this entire prophecy made sense to them. Here was a city with a thriving commerce where a wealth of nations would come, and this new king that the star foretold must be in this great city.

It's not surprising that Herod had no clue: Herod was a Roman puppet. He was appointed king over Judea and actually converted to the Jewish religion to buy him some credibility with the people he governed – think of how much furor was generated over the rumor that Barack Obama was Muslim. As religiously diverse as this nation is, and as much as we like to profess that there is a separation of church and state, anyone who doesn't profess to be something close to a Christian has little chance of becoming President. Herod was not terribly popular as it was; it would have been worse if he was a pagan.

But Herod had no clue what these Wise Men were talking about; he probably hadn't read much or cared much about Isaiah or Israel's past history; he just wanted to keep his job, and it was a bit unsettling for him to learn that his replacement had been born somewhere close by.

And so he consults with his religious experts who get it right: No, King Herod, it's not a KING who the Magi are looking for; it's a Messiah. And no, King Herod, he has not been born in the midst of this splendid city, among the aristocracy, to form any political alliance that will overthrow your rule. He has been born in Bethlehem.

You notice that the Wise Men got it wrong on two counts: on both who and where. It was not a king who was born; it was THE Messiah. He was not born in fabulous Jerusalem; he was born in po-dung Bethlehem, in a feeding trough no less. The wise men were following the right star, but they had applied it to the wrong prophecy. Micah was the one who spoke of the Messiah, and that Messiah was not to be born in the splendor of Jerusalem but in the squalor of Bethlehem:

“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.”

You might imagine if the Wise Men came to the penthouse of a Wall Street banker to celebrate the birth of this special child and was told, “Sorry, but the one you're looking for lives in the Bronx.”

Do you remember last week the reading from 1 Samuel that warned the people about the nature of a king, how he would enslave the people? A messiah is a different thing altogether...one who will rule, but rule as a shepherd. And a shepherd protects and provides food for his sheep. A king exploits and subjugates. A king looks out for himself and rules with an iron fist. A poor shepherd only wants to keep his sheep safe and fed.

And kings tend to be the same, one to another; if one king overthrows another, all it usually means is that a different aristocracy replaces the old. But a Messiah is different. A Messiah is a one-shot deal; you don't have a succession of Messiahs. And while the arrival of a new king changes nothing, the arrival of a Messiah changes *everything*. To the poor and the oppressed the arrival of a new king just means that the face of the rich and the oppressor changes. But to the poor, the arrival of THE MESSIAH means that they have legitimate hope, that God is doing something unique, something different, and that the world is changing, that tomorrow may bring something different from what we had today.

My brothers and sisters, do you have hope that this year will be different from the last? That the world would be less violent, more peaceful? More friendly? That people would be more welcoming, more

understanding? These are the hopes for which Jesus was born. He calls us to walk with him in faith, to walk among the poor as he himself was born among the poor. He teaches us that it is better to serve than to be served, because the path to self service is a path we come to out of fear, the same fear that Herod expressed when he learned that another king had been born, the same fear that drove him to send out soldiers to kill babies. Fear does that; it leads you to protect yourself at all cost, including the lives of infants. I don't think anyone here is a baby killer, but if our minds lead us to believe that Jesus is to be found among the rich and powerful, then that will be where we strive to be, and all we will be doing is perpetuating a broken order where people who live in fear struggle to keep what they have or gain what they don't have believing that it will bring them some peace. But the only peace we gain is from God, and the way we gain it is by going beyond Jerusalem to Bethlehem, to see the Messiah who came to bring us hope of something new and radically different, a kingdom (if you will) founded on love and caring not just for those who we know but for those who are strangers as well. Remember that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Find him THERE, and from there walk with him wherever he leads you this new year, and may it truly be a NEW year for you.

ⁱ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2103>