

Matthew 2:1–12

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These texts, the traditional texts for Epiphany, are something of a light show, like one of those multi-spotlighted things they have at the fairground, with lasers and everything else. The face of Jesus lights up in the darkness. We'll be seeing him, and various aspects of him, all the way through the Epiphany season. But along with that we begin to see some of the dark background to Christ's ministry. And we also get a sense from these texts of the scope of his work, just how far it extends. We'll get some help on that particularly from the supporting texts, so we'll start there, and then we'll go, rubber cigars and everything, to march with the three kings. How about that? That should be fun.

The Nations Come to the Light: Isaiah 60

First of all, Isaiah 60. Isaiah 60 is one side of a conversation carried on throughout the Old Testament, principally between the priestly sources and the prophetic. The priests are concerned to demonstrate that the covenant is conditional on human response and human obedience. So we get the Deuteronomic history, which conditions Israel's current state of being on its fidelity or its infidelity, and which is generally concerned, like Ezra and Nehemiah and other parts of the Old Testament, with enclosing the promise, confining it to Israel. The conviction is that God's election of Israel is self-enclosed: it is for Israel's sake, over against the other nations of the earth.

Isaiah belongs to a different tradition, a prophetic tradition that includes not only prophets like Isaiah himself but books like Ruth and Jonah, which understand the hope of Israel as a hope given for the whole earth. Israel is called, in the words of J. P. Milton, one of my old teachers, "blessed to be a blessing." The election of Israel, the calling of Israel, the choosing of Abraham and Sarah and their progeny, is an election in response to the disasters of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, where God begins over again, choosing one nation of the earth that will witness to him among all the nations.

So Isaiah is practically ecstatic in the sixtieth chapter, setting out this hope in some of the golden language of the whole book, and of course anything that is golden in Isaiah is golden everywhere. “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.”

His glory will appear over you. Here it begins. One of the great things about the prophetic hope is that it doesn’t deny the reality of the darkness. It doesn’t deny the reality of the covering, the hiddenness, the contrariness. The hope is always given in the midst of it, under the sign of it, in its context. Darkness will cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples, but the light will shine in the darkness, and the darkness, as John says, will not overcome it. It will not be able to contain it.

And because this light has broken loose, “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” All the nations of the earth are now coming to receive the blessing that has been extended to Israel, and through Israel to all the nations. This language is just gorgeous. I especially think it’s great to hear the promise of verse 6: “A multitude of camels shall cover you.” That might not be everything you hoped for, but you understand what is involved. “The young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.” And what will they bring? Exactly what was found in the hands of the three kings of Orient, who came bearing gifts: “gold and frankincense,” and myrrh. But more than that: “and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

A Prayer for the King: Psalm 72

If we can say that Isaiah is on one side of this dialectic in the Old Testament, then we have to say that Psalm 72 is on the other. This is a more priestly kind of document, because what Isaiah proclaims as coming through Israel to all the rest of the nations, this psalm says will come through the king. There is an office. It has to be regularized and kept in condition. And so there is a king.

First of all, always remember that this psalm is a prayer. “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son.” The psalmist calls out to God to do exactly what Isaiah proclaims, but to do it through a king, through the king. “May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give

deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” This is a gorgeous prayer. It is redolent of the hope of the gospel, and so it fits easily on our lips.

But we might be a little suspicious. You hear that I am, of course. My experience with authorities has generally been very disappointing. I agree with Samuel, and with the good Lord, who laughs and holds them in derision. I would not pray for a king to do this, because I figure a king is likely to blow it. A king will probably appoint a bishop, and then it’s going to go straight into the toilet from there. Better to ask the good Lord to do it, and to appoint the means he considers appropriate. If he does it, then we can really believe that the desert peoples will bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust. If you hope for that in the king, good luck. It’s going to be big trouble, because those who lick the dust will be looking to lick you just as fast as they can.

“May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.” I think that’s an appropriate hope for the good Lord, actually. We could wish for that. We pray for it. We believe that in the end every knee will bow and every tongue confess. But if they are to bow down before the king, or before some second-rate bishop who thinks he’s a king, then probably we should pray that the good Lord will find another vehicle. The batting average of kings is not very impressive. I did hear a wonderful story the other day about a good bishop. Of course, he’s eighty and serving on an interim basis, so he won’t be around for long. That’s the way it goes.

So we have a cosmic hope expressed by the prophet Isaiah, which is being trimmed here into a more palatable tradition for Israel.

Fellow Heirs: Ephesians 3

When we get to Ephesians 3, the wraps come off once again. This is really fun. The apostle Paul loves nothing better than setting out this hope in cosmic terms, so that God can give and bless and grant and act as he restores the earth. Paul speaks of the revelation of the mystery that has come to him. Of course, according to the letter, he is confined. He is living in jail. It’s easy to think cosmically, I suppose, when you have eighty-one square feet and bars surrounding you. No, it’s not easy at all. But that’s the apostle Paul, whose hopes can never be trimmed or contained, and so he is overflowing with hope.

I want you to look particularly at the middle of this passage, where he speaks in the most radical terms of the Gentiles. In fact he defines the gospel this way, in verse 6: “that is, the

Gentiles have become fellow heirs.” There you go. Take that, Psalm 72! This is Jonah and Ruth and Isaiah running away with the tradition, singing with great joy, in the apostle Paul, of the Gentiles being welcomed in. They are being placed on equal terms. They are included as heirs of the gospel. “The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” That is what has been revealed to Paul. That is what has been revealed to us in Christ Jesus. That is the hope of the gospel. There you go: the promise is for you.

I had a wonderful phone call this morning from my last graduate student, who is now doing his doctorate with me on Philip Melancthon. We’re having a lot of fun; it’s just been wonderful. He’s going through another school, so I don’t have to put up with faculty matters. The other night he got a phone call that his ninety-two-year-old uncle, an old reprobate sinner, was dying. And he went over there with the gospel. His uncle was digging up his former sins, and Scott said to him, “I don’t know why you want to keep jumping into that cesspool and bringing up that old stuff. Christ Jesus has taken care of it already. He’s your Lord, and he’s coming after you now for sure.”

So the promise is for the Gentiles, for the outsider. Now, we should be careful with this, because the contemporary hermeneutic wants to make the Gentile represent any social class or particular people it wants to champion at any given time. Inclusion becomes indiscriminate, and the hope of the gospel gets watered down into bourgeois manners. So we want to say right from the start that this happens in Christ Jesus. This is not a philosophy, not an idea, not a system, not a construct, not a policy. This is a relationship, and the relationship has been established in Christ. And because the relationship has been established in Christ, it extends as far as his hand. He extends his hand to the sinner. He extends his hand to the outsider, just as he extended it to the Syrophoenician woman, to that dear old lady who had a flow of blood for all those years, to Bartimaeus and all the rest. It is in Christ that the inclusion happens, not in some philosophical destruction of all the standards, so that you can sit in your office and save people without ever talking to them or having the joy of handing the gospel over.

My great student Scott, whom I love, could have sat in his house in his chair and said, “Well, God saves everyone. I don’t have to go and tell him anything at all.” What fun would that have been? Instead he went to a real sinner, who had been in wholesale rejection all his life, and handed the gospel over to him: dying, desperate, scared, wanting, hoping, dreaming, hanging

on to his old sins in desperate fear. Finally his hands dropped, and Christ Jesus took him. That's the way it works. That's the good stuff.

So Paul has been made a minister of this gospel according to the gift of God's grace, and we continue his ministry in speaking this word. We could stay here a while longer, but we have to hustle off to the three kings, because these guys are as magnificent as ever.

The Magi and the Darkness: Matthew 2

There is lots of evidence of darkness in this story. In fact, the story is told against a background of darkness, and it keeps erupting all over the text.

The wise men: the NRSV translates "magi" the way it should be translated. These are astrologers. You have to know that these guys are the idle rich. They are people with the means to sit studying the stars, attempting to figure out their fate from the formations of the heavens. You remember that Melanchthon loved astrology. He was a very careful student of it, famously so, well known throughout Europe as an astrologer, and Luther used to make fun of it all the time. Once Melanchthon was offered a post at the University of Cambridge in England, and he turned it down because his stars said he would drown crossing a northern body of water, which he was sure was the English Channel. Luther just laughed uproariously at this. Here is Melanchthon studying his astrological charts and rejecting the doctrine of the bondage of the will. Go figure. That's kind of nuts. Anyway, astrology didn't have much of a reputation then, and it doesn't now. They are the magi, magicians who think they can figure things out. So the darkness is in the wise men right from the very start.

When they get to Herod, more of it breaks out. You know Herod. That family is pictured in the line I've quoted before from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, where Herod says, "Jesus, you're so cool; walk across my swimming pool." That's the kind of people they are. His son is the Herod who is going to kill John the Baptist after a striptease, all hot, pulling at his collar, promising to do anything this young girl wants, and of course her mother is right there with a suggestion for getting rid of this nuisance, John the Baptist. There's darkness all over here.

So we have a context of rebellion and self-seeking, and it really erupts when the wise men get there. Think of it. Here they come, following this star, and apparently the star is twinkling or isn't reliable enough, so they stop in Jerusalem for some help. And of course they stop at Herod's house. Delicious. They come and say, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Who is this guy, and where is he supposed to be born?

The first thing Herod does is panic. He hunkers through life like Cain, able to feel an insult at a thousand yards. He has his radar on, able to catch every threat. So he panics, thinking he is going to have some Middle Eastern insurrection on his hands. He turns on the alarm and goes looking for the chief priests and the scribes.

You've got to bet that the early Christians just loved this story and told it over and over again, laughing and slapping their knees. Here you have three astrologers wandering around the Middle East looking for this star. All they have is a star to guide them, but they know the Christ child is going to be born. And they go to the chief priests and the scribes, and the chief priests and the scribes search the Scriptures. That's what you should do, of course. There's a fun contrast here between the reliability of the biblical word and the uncertainty of the star. The wise men are guided by the star; they need help finding their way, and they get it from the Scripture.

But they don't get it from the priests and the scribes, who, with all the rest of Jerusalem, are as frightened as Herod, wondering whether there's going to be another transition in power and how they can prepare themselves to hold their places. You can just bet on that. They're all scared. And notice that the wise men take off alone. The chief priests and the scribes tell them where the Messiah is to be born, but they go back to dinner. They haven't finished their third bottle of wine, Herod is hoping for another dancer, and they are all waiting to see who is going to be moved up and who moved down, and where the chairs will be arranged for the next banquet. They are caught up in themselves. They couldn't care less. The darkness is sufficient for them, so long as they can find their way to the nearest promotion. Good night! How much darkness do you want? There it is.

So the wise men start off on their own, and with the help of the star, now informed by the word, they come. And what they find is more than anybody could ever have hoped for. Guided by a star and led by the word, they find their way. Of course, they have to stop at Herod's house beforehand once more. He has some little ruse cooked up. This is how sinners operate, and how the world operates: "When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." Fat chance of that. You can't even fool a magus with that; they know better. So Herod sits back, hoping these three guys will leave breadcrumbs so he can follow them. And they go down to Bethlehem, and when they get there, oh, it's everything you could hope for, and more.

“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.” The good Lord has his thumb on the scale. He is tipping history a little so he can make sure he gets these wise men; probably he was worried they would stop to cast a chart along the way or sell their services. So he moves the star, and they follow it, and they come. “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.”

Can you beat that? They saw the most magnificent sight imaginable. These guys who had enough money to sit and track the stars, who probably hadn't put in a productive day's work in their whole lives, who had nothing to do but sit around and speculate, were captured by a star that brought them part of the way. The word brought them the rest of the way, with the star leading. And when they got there, what did they behold? The incarnation itself: God in the flesh. Probably they didn't know that; probably an angel had to tell them what they saw. But they were filled with joy, seeing this little mother nursing her child, and Joseph standing there all thumbs, trying to learn how to change a diaper, trying to stay upright so he didn't fall on his keister in front of his wife, trying to be a father now that he and his young wife have this new child.

“Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh”: the gifts promised in the psalm, the gifts spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, the gifts of royalty, extended now to a child nursing in his mother's arms. The king of the universe has become a little one, and there he is, worshiped by these wise men.

It's not over yet, of course. If they are going to get out of this situation, the good Lord is going to have to intervene. Having had guidance from a star and guidance from the word, now they get guidance from a dream: they should go home by another road. And so they do, because Herod is coming in the name of death to do what a world of death does. Behold, a new king comes, the long-awaited king, the Messiah. And so there is no alternative for Herod but to bring out his armies and put to death a whole generation of children, all the infants and those close enough to infancy to represent a threat. Bethlehem becomes bedlam, as Edmund Spenser said. Death breaks out, the darkness returns, and the light goes on a donkey's back down to Egypt to rest in safety, and to come back a little later and try again. It's so great.

So we get these contrasts running through this text. I sometimes suspect that Matthew has sharpened the knife a little: these idle astrologers know what the chief priests and the scribes

don't. And I sometimes suspect, as I said, that the early church had a huge guffaw over this. "That'll show them." And of course it did. But that is just the darkness rejoicing in somebody else's loss. Because the hope here is the hope proclaimed by Isaiah, the hope proclaimed by Paul in Ephesians, the hope proclaimed in John 1: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Everybody in this text is caught in the darkness in one way or another, and yet the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot destroy it. It twinkles. It erupts. It manifests. It opens. It shows. It reveals. It is Epiphany.

Well, that will give you something to chew on. You could preach on the story of the wise men for a good long time. I love that text. There is so much in it you can never get to the bottom of it, all these wonderful and amusing contrasts between Herod and the wise men, for example.

I see I've given you the Epiphany texts. What really happened is that I always listen to the Bach cantatas every Sunday; that's where I hear the word preached most of the time. I've been listening to the *Christmas Oratorio*, and it led me right into these Epiphany texts, and I followed in lockstep. I should have called and asked. We'll have to do the Baptism of Our Lord texts next time around.

Questions and Answers

A comment that Herod and the priests are both caught in the law.

That's exactly right, Matt. Herod assumes he is in charge of the law, and he is led along by the nose. The chief priests and the scribes assume their job is dispensing the law. In fact they are in the grip of such unbelief that it doesn't occur to them, when they walk back to the table after the wise men leave, that life and salvation have been knocking on their door in the form of three crazy old coots all dressed up and smoking rubber cigars. It's really fun. Legalism on both ends, exactly right.

A comment on the guidance the wise men receive in a dream.

The good Lord finds a way to get through. You can't put your dreams in the bank, but that doesn't mean he won't use one once in a while. I've had some real lulus involving death that have been the most comforting dreams imaginable, and I really have thought that these are gifts of angels. When my mother died, I had a dream that she was driving down Highway 36 in the back of an old Model A. The angels were playing Louis Armstrong numbers, and she was standing in the back with her hospital gown flying open, singing at the top of her lungs.

I've laughed about that dream for forty years. It's just fabulous. So if you start investing money on this basis, you'd better call me. But if you receive one like this, give thanks.

A comment that the wise men were outsiders, more like gypsies than kings.

That's exactly right. We want these wise men to be children in bathrobes. In fact they are three hippies, three crazies living out on the edge of town. This is nutty stuff. If you had told the chief priests and the scribes to go and talk to the magi, they would have laughed you out of the room. Gypsies is exactly it. There is absolutely nothing to be expected from them. But the good Lord likes to choose what is weak and despised in the world to overturn the strong. It's fun to imagine Herod calling in the chief priests and the scribes, and then coming over and seeing these magi and saying, "What the hell is this? You called me away from dinner for these jokers? Come on." It's just as contrary as the good Lord.

A comment that the myrrh anticipates his burial.

Oh, gosh, just fabulous, Brian: the burial spices. As Uncle Roy used to say, you can't read a chapter here without anticipating his death. Even with the myrrh they are providing for him. Our daughter-in-law from Germany has been with us for Christmas, and her grandmother just died. She had been under Alzheimer's for several years. I saw her two years ago, but I never really got to know her, because she was already gone. She died at seven o'clock at night, and the authorities didn't come until four o'clock the next afternoon to take her body. In the meantime her dad, her aunt and uncle, and her grandpa sat giving thanks and remembering. There's something wonderful about that. The good Lord shows up at the edges, where we least expect him.

Well, we'll have some fun with the Epiphany 2 texts; we'll dig into them next week. One way or another, we'll keep in touch. God's peace to you, and happy new year.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZtAf2lkjh4>

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