

Sermon- Following the Star to a King like No Other

Scripture: Matt 2:1-12

Sunday, December 9, 2018

Today is the second Sunday of Advent and we are going to take a break from the Gospel of John for the rest of this year and come back to it in January. Today we are going to focus on the Christmas story. One aspect of the Christmas story that I really love is the story of the wise men from the East who came to see Jesus. That is what we are going to look at today.

Now this story I think is really fascinating for many reasons. Firstly, the prophetic piece. You see when the wise men come to King Herod and ask him where the King of the Jews was to be born he consults his own wise men and they immediately come up with the Micah 5:2 prophecy. Verse 6 of our passage quotes Micah like this “And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel”. But if you look at this quote in Micah it does not stop there, but continues, “Whose goings forth *are* from of old, From ^[a]everlasting”. No ordinary human can be described as “whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting”. Clearly the Micah prophecy was talking about a divine figure who would be born in Bethlehem. This prophesy is remarkable in itself.

But the story of the wise men gets even more interesting because it is saying that even non-Jewish people were waiting for this divine. And not only were they waiting, they knew how to recognize it when it happened. How? Well, it happened like this. A group of magi, who were both religious people as well as mathematicians and astrologers were observing the night sky when one day they saw a new star they had not seen before. This new star because of its position in the zodiac indicated to them that this was the signal of the birth of an extremely special king of the Jews. Someone special enough that before this king had done anything in life, just by being born, they thought

it necessary for them to drop everything and go and worship him. Now I want to just put this in context for you. In terms of kings of the Jews, I went and counted. Without naming them all them, there are 20 “Kings of the Jews” from Solomon’s Son Rehoboam to Zedekiah. King Herod is not being counted because he was not of the line of David but an Edomite convert to Judaism. I mention these kings because in no case in the Bible or even outside the Bible was I able to find an instance where someone was recognized as a king by his horoscope. But that is what happens in this case. This star configuration was indicating that a king like no other had been born. A king so special that it would be a once in a lifetime opportunity to go and see him. And so they dropped everything and went to honor this extraordinary child.

Now, friends, I ask you, if this star was such a big deal to the wise men of Persia, if this star was able to lead them to Jesus, what do we know about this star? When we tell the story of Jesus to someone new and it comes time to tell this story do we know about this so called star of Bethlehem. Actually, many things about this star are puzzling. The first thing is if there was some well-known Star in the East, why did King Herod’s people not observe it? The other problem is how can a star lead you to an unknown destination? You see stars are fixed in the sky. SO if you know which direction you want to go, you can look up, find the North Star, and know which way is north and accordingly take the direction you want to go. But if you did not know where to go, how are the stars going to lead you, right? And in terms of the journey itself, our wise men would have first followed the Star to go West to Jerusalem. Then Bethlehem is actually 5 miles South of Jerusalem. Which star changes direction like that? Finally at Bethlehem the Star stopped. What star moves like that? So the question is, is this some completely miraculous event, or was there a non-miraculous explanation. Which I think could be even more amazing because that means that God designed the whole night sky to somehow indicate to 3 Persian wise men how to find baby Jesus. Which do you find

more amazing? Well, today's astronomers¹ have actually solved the first Christmas sky puzzle to indicate that God actually designed the whole night sky to guide these wise men. If you are willing to hang with me I will lay out for you what I found out.

Now in verse 2 of our passage this morning we find a phrase that the wise men use when they are speaking to King Herod. They say, *Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship.* It turns out that the phrase "in the East" was a very big clue that the wise men were giving. Because what we now know is that ***in the East*** is a literal translation of a well-known technical term in Greek mathematical astrology called ***en te anatole***. Can you say, ***en te Anatole?*** Just keep ***en te anatole*** in mind like I discuss a few basics in reading the night sky. When you look at the night sky, on a clear night you can see many stars right? And all these stars rise in the East and make an arc through the night and set in the West just like our sun does right? That happens because of the rotation of our Earth. But in this night sky, the position of the stars are fixed relative to each other right? They do move but that movement cannot be detected in a human lifespan. But that is not true for planets. With planets you can see their movement against the fixed stars if you are a very experienced astronomer. And when the planet is in front of the Earth's night sky you can see it. But when the planet is at the back of the Earth you cannot see it. So the only stars in the sky that appear and disappear are actually planets. And when a planet first appears on the Eastern horizon just before sunrise that is called "heliacal rising". And heliacal is what ***en te anatole*** is. In fact our astronomers have figured out that the night sky 2000 years ago had planet Jupiter in an extremely rare zodiac position that signaled a very special Royal Birth. Mind you, because this planet is visible only for a few minutes because the sky brightens, you would only be able to observe this if you were looking extremely carefully. Our astronomers have calculated that planet Jupiter was visible in this special zodiac configuration from April 17 of 6 BC to Dec 19th of that year. And the amazing this

¹ <http://theconversation.com/can-astronomy-explain-the-biblical-star-of-bethlehem-35126>, David Weintraub, University of Vanderbilt

is that, the very first day this occurred, our wise men saw it and understood that this was the sign they were looking for all these years. Amazing right. Now you might be wondering, but how were these magi on the look out for our Messiah. Great question, you see these wise men were the magi of the Persian court. This was the same court that our own wise men, prophet Daniel served for, for about 70 years under various kings from about 580 BC onwards. Now you will remember that Daniel rose to prominence because he interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream. And in interpreting his dream, he was also able to stop the order to kill all the other magi of the court. If you were one of the other Magi, would you not be very curious about Daniel's God who was able to let Daniel know both the king's dream and its interpretation? I think so. And because of that Daniel's Scriptures most likely were studied by these magi. And as they studied it, what did they find? That this remarkable God was going to come into the world as its Messiah. Would you not have been desperately looking for signs of this great event? You can also argue that they must have developed tools and techniques to study the sky even better through the centuries. So the moment they saw the sign, the *en te anatole* of Jupiter they knew what they were looking at. You see, the star of Bethlehem was only visible to people who are specifically looking and knew where to look. That is why Herod's people never noticed this star. Herod was not looking for a Messiah. After all he was the only King that Israel needed. The Star of Bethlehem was only visible to people who were actually looking for it.

But we need to admire these wise men, not only because they were the first to detect the Star of Bethlehem, we need to admire them because the moment they saw the star they acted on its call, packed their bags and got on this incredible 8 month journey to a different country.

But that still leaves us with a piece of this puzzle. How does the star of Bethlehem lead the magi to Bethlehem and then stop when they reach their destination? So the first part of their journey, the journey from Iran to the city of Jerusalem they are not using

the star of Bethlehem to navigate. They can see Jupiter move forward everyday but they use the other stars to get to Jerusalem because that part of the journey they already knew their destination. Then when they come to Jerusalem, they needed further directions so they come to the kings court where they thought they would find people like Daniel who would be able to guide them further. They were able to speak to Herod's advisers and figure out that they should be going to Bethlehem. So now they again know where they are headed. So they use all their navigation skills to travel 5 miles south to Bethlehem. All the while the star of Bethlehem is still moving forward. Then when it reaches Bethlehem it stops. How does this happen? Actually, there is a very good explanation for this phenomenon. Remember Jupiter is moving around the sun and that is the movement the magi are detecting every morning. But the earth is also moving around the sun. Because the earth is on an inside tract, it has its inside tract advantage and so it is orbiting the sun quicker than Jupiter. So at one point the earth catches up to Jupiter. And if you are an astronomer from the earth observing the movement of Jupiter you will see that Jupiter has stopped moving. This point where the movement of a planet stops has a name in Greek astronomy. It is called "epano". Can you say, "epano". It is "epano" that is translated as the star "stood over" It literally means, Jupiter stood over Jesus when they had reached the home that Jesus was living in at the time. Now think about this. From Jupiter's rise in the East, its "heliacal rising" to its "epano" position, it would have been about 8 months, and that would have been the travel time for our magi from Iran to Jerusalem and finally to Bethlehem. If they had not set out on their journey in time, they would have missed the "epano" of Jupiter. The amazing thing was that they did not miss it. They acted on God's call and arrived just in time to find the baby Jesus.

Now when you look at these Magi, there are three things that they teach us. The first thing is that these people were sincere seekers. They were looking hard for the Messiah. The skills they had in studying the stars did not come randomly. I believe they studied

the stars with passion and diligence because they were expecting the stars to reveal something very great to them. And because of their expertise in reading the night sky, as soon as the smallest change appeared they not only detected it but were also able to figure out its meaning. How does this apply to us? Am I recommending that we all go out and become astronomers. No. But my appeal to you is this. If the message of Christmas is that “God is with us”, then we need to become experts in “God sightings”. When God shows up, when God does something special, when God answers prayers, we need to recognize these signs. I was with some friends on Friday night having dinner with them and I was sharing what God is doing in our neighborhood. As I shared it was like the spirit was leaping within them and they said, “wow we can see God working in your neighborhood”. These people were experts in God sightings I can tell you! Like the Magi, we need to be expert in God sightings. God is working in our midst and we need to see Emmanuel not just sing about Emmanuel. The Bible says, when we seek then we will find. It was true for the Magi and it will be true for us. **The first take away from our magi friends, are, become experts in God sightings my friends.**

The second thing that we see the Magi do is that, when they sighted what they were looking for, they acted immediately. They could have easily said, ok we saw an en te anatole, a star rise in the East and left it at that. Nobody would have faulted them for not doing anything more. Because to go meet this child who was born would involve leave everything behind for almost two years while they traveled to a different country. We are talking about at 8 month camel ride one-way. And here is the deal folks, remember I talked about the period between the heliacal rising to the epano. So this star guidance system only works if you hit the road at the right time. If they had delayed their journey by even a short period of time, planet Jupiter was not going to wait for them. The epano point would come and go and they would have no way to find the house where Jesus lived because Jesus was under special protection remember. His location had to be kept hidden from the authorities. And they would have missed a

glorious moment. When God calls us to act, there is an urgency. God has to be responded right away. If we don't respond, it is not God who loses out on the blessing of responding to whatever God is asking us to do.

Ok so the magi were experts at reading the God signs and they even responded immediately. But there is one more aspect to this story that bears our attention. You see, because the Magi revealed to King Herod the birth of the Messiah, something very drastic happened. Look at what verse 3 of your passage says. "When Herod heard this he was greatly troubled and all Jerusalem with him." The news of a new ruler in our world is not necessarily good news to everybody. Jesus Christ came to offer us *his* control of *our* lives. But this is not Good News if you want to keep control right? King Herod was not about to give up any control. When Herod heard about the birth of the Messiah he had all male babies 2 and under killed. Imagine the pain and suffering and tears off such a killing of babies. And none of this would have happened if the Magi sat quietly at home after their astronomical observations. The same is true for you and me. If you want to play it safe, not rock the boat, just sit at home. You will have a kind of peace. On the other hand if you seek after God's voice and respond in obedience then there will be times of spiritual upheaval. Because when God steps into the domain of Satan, a spiritual battle takes place. But don't worry because God is in that battle, even though you may lose some peace on the surface, He will give you a deep peace. The Bible describes it as a "peace that passeth all understanding". It is the kind of peace that the angels sang about in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace on whom his favor rests". May you be who the angels are taking about. Those who look for the God's voice. Those who act on His call. Those on whom His favor rests. Peace be with you. Let us pray.