

## Christmas 2 – The Journey of the Magi

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Jeremiah 31:7–14, Psalm 84, Ephesians 1:3-14, Matthew 2:1-12

As we rehearse the stories of Scripture, the Lord addresses us as a community and as individuals. The Word of God addresses us and calls us to Himself. He is changing us even as He is changing His world. Today we gather to hear His address through stories of pilgrimage.

The blind and lame are walking to Zion. The pregnant woman, the woman in labor, and a whole company of people are heeding the call. In the middle of their lives, God is calling, drawing, opening their hearts to His love. They are crying out to God for mercy; they are singing songs of joy; they are radiant with the light of God’s goodness shining upon them and filling their lives with His gifts of love. They are dancing, making merry because the Lord has comforted them in their sorrow. Their mourning has been transformed into joy.

Wise Men of the East have come to the Holy City. Our Gospel reading says, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’”<sup>1</sup>

This word “behold” is a word that calls us to stop and pay attention. Lo and Behold Wise Men came from the East to Jerusalem. It is calling our attention to this odd and wondrous event. They have come to see the king of the Jews. They saw His star rise and they came to worship. They saw and they came. To worship.

Herod is blind. Jerusalem is blind. The Wise Men see. They come. They worship. St. John Chrysostom writes, “In order to end the ancient curse, and to call the world to worship him, and for him to be venerated in every land and sea, as it was from the very beginning, the Lord opened the door to the Gentiles. God was willing to instruct his own people through strangers. After all, the prophets had been continually proclaiming his advent, and yet the people gave this no great consideration. So it happened that the Lord brought barbarians from a far country, seeking after the King who was “among the Jewish people.”<sup>2</sup>

These strangers from a faraway land come and worship the King of the Jews. How did these Wise Men learn about the birth? Our text says that “we saw His star when it rose.” Matthew is alluding to the word of the Moabite prophet Balaam. Balak, the King of the Moabites, called Balaam to curse the Israelites but every time Balaam raised his voice in a curse, he ended up blessing them.

In his final blessing, Balaam declares,

<sup>17</sup> I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near:  
a star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:1–2.

<sup>2</sup> D. H. Williams and Robert Louis Wilken, eds., *Matthew: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, trans. D. H. Williams, The Church’s Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 25.

it shall crush the forehead of Moab  
and break down all the sons of Sheth.<sup>3</sup>

From a distance, Balaam prophecies the coming of the Davidic kingdom. Unknowingly, he prophecies the last King of the Jews, the Babe Jesus, “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” Matthew is suggesting in His Gospel narrative that the Wise Men have heard this ancient prophecy and followed this miraculous star to Jerusalem, and to Bethlehem.

Pope Benedict XVI suggests that the Lord reaches the pagan culture through signs they understand like the star. This star is actually pointing to the true star of the Word of God.<sup>4</sup> The Word of God has addressed them in their own vernacular, but He is drawing them to Himself. He is drawing them beyond their world to the place of Revelation, His Word Made Flesh. And what is all this leading to? Worship.

This pattern of God’s Word addressing the nations and drawing them to Himself is seen throughout Scripture. Consider the story of Namaan, the Commander of the Syrian Army. He was a leper. There was an Israelite girl who had been captured by the Syrians, and she served Namaan’s wife. She tells her mistress of a prophet in Israel who could heal Namaan’s leprosy. The Lord addresses Namaan through a child of the covenant people, and she bears witness to God’s work through Elisha.

At first, Namaan resists Elisha’s direction to bathe in the Jordan seven times. Namaan is ready to leave in anger, but his servants declare to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”<sup>14</sup> So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”<sup>5</sup> The Word of God went forth from Israel into Syria through an enslaved girl, and this word brought healing and restoration. Plus, it prepares a way for God’s people in the future.

Again, consider the exiles in Babylon. They have been taken captive by the great and mighty power of Babylon. What happens to the faithful remnant who are taken captive? They become witnesses to the Word of God given to Israel. Daniel speaks the word to King Nebuchadnezzar, King Darius, and King Cyrus. Even in desperate conditions, the Word of God goes forth through His people. Consider the countless martyrs who faithfully proclaimed Christ unto the end. Consider the Christians today that are held in prisons around the world. God’s people bear witness to his Word wherever they are. His Spirit is working through them to draw the nations to Himself.

Now let me clarify. This is not a technique the Lord’s people learn. The enslaved Israelite girl did not go through an Evangelism program to learn tools and tricks for cultural engagement. She simply spoke out of who she was and what she knew. In Luke 12, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will give God’s people the words to speak when they need them. He says,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Nu 24:17.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 77–78.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Ki 5:13–14.

“And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, <sup>12</sup> for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”<sup>6</sup>

Wherever we live and work and serve, His Spirit is bearing witness to His Word Made Flesh through God’s people wherever we go: in the business world, the political world, the home, and even grocery store.

He is drawing the nations to Himself. This calling, this drawing, this leading seems slow compared to some marketing campaigns for Jesus. The path to faith and eventually holiness is not a five-year goal plan or a set of resolutions. It is a pilgrimage, a journey. And yet, God has worked this way for millennia. People make starts and stops along the way.

In one sense, it is a pilgrimage that lasts a lifetime. The Wise Men saw and came and worshipped, and then they went home. The pilgrimage didn’t end when they left Jerusalem. TS Eliot captures some of this strange and even disconcerting pilgrimage in His poem, “The Journey of the Magi.” When the Magi return home, they are no longer at home. In the final lines of the poem he writes,

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Once we encounter the Word Made Flesh, Jesus Christ, our hearts burn for His presence alone. We’ve been changed. We cannot go back. Augustine speaks of the mystery of longing to be in God’s Presence. Augustine knows that is God created all things, and that he cannot leave God’s presence. And yet, once he has tasted and seen the goodness of the Lord, his desire is fixed on dwelling in this glorious presence. Life becomes a pilgrimage, a journey, toward the one who has created him, called him, and continues to sustain him.

Paul writes in Philippians, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”<sup>7</sup> He has abandoned reputation, financial stability, physical safety, and all things for the sake of knowing Christ.

Today are texts remind us of this calling of God that has come to us Gentiles, through His chosen people, the Israel of God. Now we like the Wise Men of old we set our course to follow the star of Revelation, the Word of God wherever He leads. At the same time, we ourselves have become living witness stars if you will who “shine out as lights in the world.”

Because our endurance is weak, it helps to journey from one place to the next. One milestone to the next. From Advent to Christmas to Epiphany and onward to the cross of Christ. The liturgical

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<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 12:11–12.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 3:12.

year is one way of focusing the pilgrimage on steps or stages along the way. We might also speak of weekly worship and daily prayer as small steps or stops along the way. We take baby steps, little pilgrimages, even as we follow the Holy Spirit in a lifelong journey that leads us ever forward into the fulness of the love and glory of Christ Jesus our Lord.