

# A MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

Matthew 2:1-12

The Epiphany of Our Lord

January 6, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for The Epiphany of our Lord comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 12. It is on page 681 of the pew Bible. Before we read the text, I want to draw your attention to one word: “behold.” Often times when this word appears in the Bible it’s put there to mark something surprising. “Behold.” It can kind of sound like a throw-away word, but it’s not; Matthew puts it there to draw our attention to something surprising and unexpected. So listen for the surprises. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus’ name.

<sup>1</sup> 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>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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A mysterious light has appeared, and I’m not talking about the star. The star is more of a shadow of this mysterious light. The light is the one Isaiah prophesied of in the Old Testament (Is. 60:1-6), and which Paul called a “mystery” in the epistle lesson (3:1-12). It is a light that has

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dawned, not merely upon Israel, but on the entire world. In this text we see a mysterious light shining on the nations.

But before we get to this mysterious light, we need to dispel a few myths associated with this text. This is one of those texts where certain myths have come alongside the story, but when we examine the text, we'll find that the biblical record doesn't always support them. So we're going to play a few rounds of MythBusters. I'll make a statement, and then you decide whether it's a myth or a fact. You probably don't want to shout the answer out, because we don't really do that here, but feel free to whisper to the person next to you. And I'll award points based on the difficulty of the question. Now I suppose I've already given away that the point of this game is to bust the myths, so I'm going to sneak a few facts in just to keep you honest. Here we go.

Round one: *These visitors from the east were kings.* Fact or myth? Despite the old song "We Three Kings," these were not kings. They were called "Magi," and Magi were not kings. So this myth is busted. If you got this right, give yourself one point.

Round two: *Magi, or "wise men," were really wise.* Fact or myth? This might be one of the more surprising ones, because we call them "wise men," but this is actually a myth. They were not wise in the biblical sense of the word, and the Bible never actually calls them "wise." Again, the word that is often translated as "wise men," is really the word "Magi." And the only other place we encounter the Magi in the Bible is in the book of Daniel, where King Nebuchadnezzar calls for them and several other *supposedly* wise men to interpret his dream (Dan. 2). Long story short, they fail because they don't have any real wisdom, and Daniel succeeds because he knows the one true God and this God reveals the dream to him.

The only sense in which we can call the Magi "wise men" is that they were *supposed* by the Babylonians to be wise. They practiced some kind of pagan religion. It may have been polytheism or astrology or even satanic arts. We don't really know for sure, but there wasn't any actual wisdom in it, and this is revealed in Daniel where they come across as foolish and powerless

Even in this text the only wisdom they have is what is revealed to them. Think about this: They didn't know where the King of the Jews was to be born. They assumed it must have been in Jerusalem, but that is worldly wisdom. The Scriptures revealed the wisdom of God that the Christ would be born in lowly Bethlehem. And then the star moves to show them the right house. They can't learn this by discerning the stars in the sky. This has to be a special star, sent by God to reveal the right house. And then, if God hadn't warned them in a dream, they would have foolishly fallen for Herod's murderous plot. The Magi really had no wisdom of their own. Everything had to be revealed to them. So they were not really wise. They were the least likely people to be looking for the Christ, and that is part of the point. This was a tricky one, so if you got it right, give yourself two points.

Round three: *Whatever we call these guys, there were three of them.* Fact or myth? This one is undetermined. Traditionally we think of there being three of them because they brought three gifts, but that doesn't actually prove anything. There may have been three, or there may have been two, or there may have been fourteen. We don't know. This was another tricky one, so if you answered "inconclusive," give yourself two points.

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Round four: *The Magi were from the east.* Fact or myth? This one is a fact. The answer is in the text. They were from somewhere in the east, probably from the region of Babylon. If you got this right, give yourself one point.

Round five: *The Magi were there on Christmas Eve with the shepherds.* Fact or myth? This is a myth. They were not there on Christmas Eve. But you don't have to throw away your nativity sets. The visit of the Magi is still rather "Christmasy." So if you're going for thematic accuracy, you're fine. But if you're obsessed with historical accuracy, when Epiphany comes you can get rid of the shepherds, the animals, and the manger. You can even replace the baby Jesus with a slightly bigger one, because he was somewhere between forty days and two years old by the time the Magi found him. But they were not there on Christmas. Give yourself one point if you called this one a myth.

Round six: *The star actually moved to show them where the child was.* Fact or myth? This is a fact. The answer is right in the text. "It went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was" (2:9). This movement was outside of the normal pattern for stars. Remember, this is one of the places Matthew uses the word "behold." This indicates something unexpected. The Magi were used to watching stars; it seems like it was part of their religion. And up to this point the star probably acted like an ordinary star. It was a new and unexpected star. That's what made the Magi go to Israel, but they were legitimately surprised when it started moving. Then it stopped and stood still. This is just as miraculous as the movement. So this one is a fact. The star actually moved to show them where the child was. Give yourself two points if you got this right.

Round seven (this is getting to be a long game): *We can use the star to date the birth of Jesus.* Fact or myth? This is a myth. And maybe you've heard this one before. Every couple years some amateur astronomer has a theory about a comet or some convergence of stars that sort of coincides with the time we know Jesus was born. Then he runs the math backward to pinpoint the date. Their theories might fit with the science of the stars, but they don't fit the biblical text, because this is clearly not a normal star. It's also not a comet or any other kind of natural phenomenon, so we can't identify it according to the natural patterns of stars and comets. The whole point of the star is that it's supernatural, so we can't use it to pinpoint the date of Jesus' birth. Rather, we use the historical records about Quirinius and King Herod, and we figure it was probably around 5 BC. But we don't have an exact date, and the thing about the star giving us the date is a myth. If you got this one right, give yourself two points. And don't complain about the points either. I don't have to give you any.

Round eight (this is the last one): *The Magi turn out to be wise in the end.* Fact or myth? This is a fact. Give yourself three points. And this is the really surprising element in the text. The reason I made such a big deal earlier about Magi not being wise, is that it highlights the surprise when these pagans from some other country are the only people in Matthew's gospel to recognize this child as the Christ. Luke has a few more people in his gospel — John the Baptizer before he was born, his mother Elizabeth, the shepherds, and a couple old people at the temple named Simeon and Anna. They're all interesting in their own right. But in Matthew — a gospel which seems to be written primarily for a Jewish audience — the only people besides Mary and Joseph to recognize Jesus are these pagans from a faraway land.

This is surprising. That's why Matthew says, "Behold, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem" (2:1). And when they arrive, they ask around about where the child is who has been

born King of the Jews (2:2). But the only person who seems to take any notice to what they're saying is King Herod. And he's interested for the wrong reasons. It's highly ironic that the only person in Jerusalem who takes the Magi seriously is the king, and he just wants to kill the child. At first he doesn't care enough to send a delegation with the Magi, but later, when the Magi don't return, he's so paranoid about it that he sends soldiers to kill all the male children in Bethlehem under two years of age (2:16-18). Even at this early stage in Jesus' life, the reaction from Jerusalem is, "We must kill this Messiah."

But aside from King Herod, nobody cares. No one tags along with the Magi. None of the priests or scribes say, "Oh, I'll help you find Bethlehem; it's just a few miles this way." I suppose they find it ludicrous that God would reveal the Messiah to pagan Gentiles and not to them. *If the Christ had really been born, we would know about it before these Gentiles.*

But that's the wonder of what God is doing. That's the mystery that was hidden in former times but is now revealed. The Christ — which, by the way, is just the Greek version of the Hebrew word "Messiah" — the Christ is not for Jews only, but for the entire world. This is what Paul taught us in the epistle lesson (Eph. 3:1-12). He says, "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph. 3:6).

Herod feared that the Christ would be a political king who would pose a threat to his throne. And the Jews hoped the Christ *would be* a political king and that he would subdue the nations under them. But the Christ came neither to overthrow thrones, nor to subdue nations; he came to gather people of every nation into the same body. This is the mystery that was hidden in former times. It was there in the Old Testament, but it was hidden until Christ came. But now that Christ has come, we can see it all over the Old Testament. The mystery has been revealed, and the visit of the Magi is a picture of it. The Jewish Messiah did not belong to the Jews only, but to the whole world.

And it's not like Gentiles are a second class to Jews in this. This is one of the great heresies that was defeated in the early church, but has since come back in modern times. I still hear Christians refer to Jews as "God's chosen people" as if ethnicity has something to do with it. This is false and is contrary to the clear biblical teaching. It's not a matter of ethnicity; it's a matter of faith. This has always been the case, even in the Old Testament. That's the mystery. It was hidden, but has now been revealed. The apostle Paul calls Gentiles "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." There is no Jew; there is no Gentile; there are only children of God to whom he has revealed his Son (Gal. 3:28-29).

The visit of the Magi is an example of this. Think about this with me: Who were God's chosen people in this story? Were they the Jewish priests and scribes in Jerusalem? No. They were pagan Gentiles. That is who God chose to reveal his Son to. So we need to drop this distinction between Jew and Gentile. It doesn't exist. There are only children of God to whom he has revealed his Son.

So the really great thing we see in this text isn't really the unexpected faith of the Magi. The great thing we see in this text is Jesus the Christ. He comes into the world as a light that shines on the whole world. That's what we learn from the Magi. Even on those who dwell in the darkness of paganism, the light shines. I can't really say it any better than the prophet Isaiah,

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Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.  
And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Is. 60:1-3)

That's what we see in the visit of the Magi. These guys worshipped the wrong gods, and they looked for wisdom in all the wrong places. They were in deep darkness. But on them, the light of Christ shined. This teaches us that the light of Christ shines everywhere. Nothing is hidden from his light. Whatever kind of darkness you may live in —whether it's unbelief, or doubt, or some sin you'd like to leave in the dark— the light of Christ shines on everything, and it drives away the darkness. The light exposes what the darkness had kept hidden, and it purifies, because when the light comes, darkness vanishes.

Perhaps, when you think of Jesus as light, you may not want the light to shine on your life, because you know that it will reveal the things you would rather keep hidden. The light can be painful, kind of like in the morning when the light shines in the window, and your eyes aren't ready for it, and you'd rather it still be night time. But the day comes, whether you like it or not, and if you don't hide from it, you find it to be a good thing. Whether you want it to or not, the light reveals everything.

For the Magi, it revealed the futility of their paganism, and they rejoiced in this, because it led them to the truth. But the light of Christ also revealed the murderous paranoia of King Herod and the pious unbelief of the priests and scribes. Whether you want it to or not, the light of Christ reveals what is. This might seem painful, especially because we know there is so much darkness within us. But it's really a good thing, because this is a different kind of light. This is a purifying light, kind of like how the sun bleaches your clothes and your hair, except more so. To be in the light of Christ is to be in the light of him who was crucified for us. To drag our sins out into this light is to have them bleached away.

This mysterious light, which was hidden in ancient times, has now appeared in Jesus Christ. He shines on us. The Gentiles, who once lived in darkness, have now become children of light. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.