

Isaiah 60

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift 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.

⁵Then 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.

⁶A 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.

The Visit of the Wise Men

Matthew 2

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶"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.""

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the

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child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”⁹When 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.¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹On 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.¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Bowing before the Foolishness of God

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Texts: *Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12*

Isaiah's beautiful poetry – Arise for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you – is especially evocative in this season of Christmas and Epiphany. Just weeks ago we heard, “The people who walked in deep darkness, on them will the light shine.” Isaiah's words, written long before the birth of Jesus, seem nonetheless written especially for us in the celebration of the nativity. Our light has come. Indeed, Isaiah says that our light has so brightly shone that,

all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,

and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

The poetic words of Isaiah were shouted in joy from the hills of Judea. Centuries later their echo reverberated still from those mountainsides. For Christians Isaiah's prophecy and Matthew's story arc through the ages and point to the same event – the birth of Jesus.

Yet this simple fact lends itself to many interpretations and meanings, some troubling, some elegant but unhelpful, and some, a few, as majestic and untamed as the poetry and the story are meant to be. Let's rather quickly dispense with the troubling and unhelpful, and then turn our attention to majesty.

The most natural, yet troubling, reading sees the whole Bible as one long story of connected historical facts, which are culminated in Jesus. On this reading the prophet Isaiah, over five hundred years before Jesus' birth, foretold his nativity. In some sense, as Christians, we all read the Bible this way. And surely the New Testament authors bend backwards to hand us this interpretation of Isaiah. The New Testament writers quote the Old Testament liberally, and none of it more than Isaiah, almost always with the expressed intent to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of things predicted. Our celebrations of Advent would be the poorer without the light that will shine in the darkness, without the promised comfort to the people, without the prince of peace upon whose shoulders will the government rest, and without the highway made in the wilderness – all given us by the prophet Isaiah.

But a reading of the Bible that insists that the true and only thing Isaiah was doing was foretelling the birth of Jesus 500 years hence robs us much that Isaiah was really up to. The part

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of Isaiah we read this morning was written for the Israelites who had returned from exile in Babylon. To them it was to be like the escape from Pharaoh way back at the beginning of the Bible. It was to be a second Exodus, a second delivery by God. Except it wasn't working out that well. The return was fraught with infighting, scarce resources and little progress. Rebuilding the temple, much less David's empire seemed out of reach. It would be too bad to miss how much Isaiah's words were meant to comfort this struggling group of returning exiles. For Jews who claim Isaiah as part of their Bible and not the Old Testament of ours, it would be quite problematic to dismiss Isaiah's meaning for his own time. There is a way to majesty, but I don't think we've quite gotten hold of it yet.

At the other end of the spectrum lie Biblical scholars who have brought a wide variety of critical and scientific resources to their study of the Bible. I find the precision, carefulness and honesty of their work to provide elegant results. They study ancient languages and literary forms, the study archaeology and history, and they study the text itself. And their study leads them to some of the most interesting conclusions. For example, they might talk about the relationship between Isaiah and Matthew this way.

The stories and sources that ultimately became the Gospel of Matthew were formulated in the early years of the fledgling Christian movement. In the beginning this movement was fragile and tenuous. It needed to establish credibility, especially among the Jews, since the early Christian movement was usually a group within Judaism or a break off from it. So the narratives of the early church were constructed in such a way as to claim that Jesus and Christianity were the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jews. Indeed, the stories of Jesus' seem to be made up precisely to claim that Jesus was the one Isaiah prophesied and to claim that Jesus was in the family and lineage of David. In fact, it seems that the donkey ride to Bethlehem was made up to account for the fact that 1) Jesus' family lived in the rather unimportant village of Nazareth and 2) king David's heir was to come from Bethlehem. And the story of the Wise Men was made up to prove the fulfillment of the passage we read from Isaiah this morning, especially,

all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

The claims these scholars make often shock and even anger believers. What is this about the Bible and stories of Jesus being made up? What kind of sacrilege is that? But at the end of the day these scholars have done us a great favor in unmasking the idea that the Bible is principally a reliable historical record. They get us away from the silliness of literalism. And that's a good thing, for literalism condemns us to turn the Bible into a game, a game of prodigious mental gymnastics in which we seek to defend every outlandish detail and explain away every possible contradiction within the text. What a monumental waste of time!

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On the other hand, the scholars haven't given us very much that is useful for Sunday morning. They may keep us safe from the trap of literalism, and for that I am grateful. But it tells us very little of what we can say about Isaiah and the three Wise Men. But not all is lost. For we can take the best insights of the two ends of the spectrum, stir them into a batter and see if we can make a decent cake out of the recipe.

The literalists ask us to believe that the stories are true. They get carried away with what exactly that truth has to look like. The scholars jump in and warn us that historical literally true the stories are not. So what kind of true might they be?

Perhaps our story this morning, the story of the Wise Men itself holds the answer for us. What does it mean that three MAGI from afar saw a star and came to Bethlehem? You know, I don't think the fact, if it were a fact, that three MAGI saw a star and followed it is the most important or interesting thing. People have spent all kinds of time trying to figure out if there was some comet or other heavenly disturbance that would give historical proof to the star of Bethlehem. But it seems to me there is a greater claim the story wants to make. The story wants to say that in Jesus God did something magnificent. It was so magnificent that MAGI, who had no relationship with Judaism or emerging Christianity; God did something so magnificent that those who were far outside the spheres in which God was thought to operate could see it and could respond to it, if they were but attentive enough and willing enough to see something entirely surprising, entirely different from what they expected, entirely different from their conventional understandings and beliefs and training. Surely this is what T.S. Eliot means when at the end of his poem, "The Magi," one of the wise men ponders how this birth is also death. It is so different from where they had come from, the "old dispensation," that the old way and the old place became dead and alien.

In addition, the vastness of this truth means, Matthew wants to claim, the vastness of this truth means that all that was hoped for, "the hopes and fears of all the years" were gathered together and found in Jesus. One needs not understand this as a claim that every true thing actually leads to Jesus. For a Jew or a Buddhist, it is clearly not so. Rather it is the claim that for one who is a Christian, for one who has encountered Jesus, for one who has traveled like the MAGI – into a new and previously unknown dispensation and arrived at Bethlehem– Jesus, indeed, connects with the words and dreams of the prophet Isaiah, indeed, as the Gospel of John wants to suggest, connects with the beginning of time and the end of time.

T. S. Eliot helps make clear the stakes and the meaning for us of the story of the Wise Men. The magnificent truth of the story is that God has done and does in every moment, I would suggest, God has done and does constantly an extraordinary thing. God constantly offers us the truth, and God sets a star in the sky, not one you will see through a telescope, but a light in the heavens nonetheless, God sets a star in the sky and lovingly hopes that we will notice it, and that we will follow where it leads.

And this is the part that gets really interesting, and a little scary, too. It leads where hardly anyone expects. It leads to a king, but a king whose royalty would be mocked by a crown

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of thorns, a purple cloak and the lash of a whip. It leads to wisdom, but wisdom that would be expressed in simple parables, whose meaning was often easy but whose lesson was just as often difficult. It leads to honor, but the honor of the sinner and the tax collector invited to the table rather than the honor of the privileged few. It leads victory, but victory which would look a lot more like defeat, even to his closest followers. It leads to well-being beyond imagination, but well-being not found in the coins or the power of Caesar. As the apostle Paul would note, the power of God looks for all the world more like weakness; the wisdom of God like foolishness.

The prophet Isaiah imagined the coming light and glory of God. He imagined that they would come from far and near. They would come in countless numbers, and the flowing mass would range new mothers carried by their nurses to nations and their kings bringing gifts of gold and frankincense.

Matthew tells us that Jesus is light and glory of God. And he unfolds his story before us. Indeed, there come even Magi from the east, who bring gifts of gold and frankincense. Note that they stop by Herod's court, but what they are looking for cannot be found there. Finally, instead, we find them bowing before an infant in a feed box. There could hardly be a more graphic expression of the meaning, or of the apparent foolishness of God. For our Christmas creche we dress the Magi in robes of royalty. Matthew doesn't tell us that much. But it is surely consistent with the picture he is drawing for us – in fine and expensive robes, wearing turbans strewn with jewels, carrying rare and precious gifts, the Magi enter the stable filled with the redolent fumes of the barnyard, they find a couple, the parents, whose commonness could not be plainer, and the Magi kneel before the infant and express great joy that in this child in a back alley of Bethlehem they have found the king for whom they were looking. What an extraordinary scene!

But, of course, what is truly extraordinary is that this is precisely the destination to which God calls us. The star God places in the sky, the guiding light that God sets before us, leads here. And the implications are astounding. For this place we are led, by its very nature and by its deepest design, this place we are led must call into question the very things we tend most to trust, call into question the very things we tend most to value, call into question the very things we tend most to hope for, call into question the very things we tend most to desire, and call into question the very things we tend most to fear.

This place we are led is a challenge for us. For here either much of what we thought to be wise is foolish, or what we find here is foolishness, indeed. The Magi are clear about which it is. Were they to speak to us, they might easily borrow the words of Isaiah: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Thanks be to God. Amen.

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