

Behold! A Star Shines!

Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

Our world has been captivated in recent days by an astronomical phenomenon known as the "Christmas Star." Did you see it? I enjoyed reading about what people said about it. My favorite line is this one:

"A Christmas Star" sounds like the name of a really bad Hallmark movie, but it's a real astronomical phenomenon!

And indeed it was a real thing. It was something that had not happened for about 800 years, not since March 4, 1226. But it happened this year, appearing in our night sky on December 21st.

What a wonderful reminder of the Christmas story God gave our world in the midst of this pandemic panic so many have been experiencing! Thanks to the internet, the Christmas Star was able to be seen and talked about by millions of people all across the world. And what great timing! December 21! Isn't God amazing?

Now, just because I am someone who wants to know the answers to the questions I have, I decided to investigate March 4, 1226. I wondered "How close to Easter was the last sighting?" I checked, and Easter was in the middle of April that year, so the star sighting was about seven weeks before Easter happened. March 4th was a Wednesday. Seven weeks before Easter. Ash Wednesday. I'll say it again: Isn't God amazing?

When I learned about the coming of the Christmas star and its proximity to Christmas, I thought immediately of today's text. (We preachers think like that. It's an occupational hazard.) Maybe you did too.

We have been searching, of course, for the word "behold" in the texts that surround the birth story of Jesus.

BEHOLD!

Today's text does not disappoint. In fact, if you were listening carefully, you heard TWO uses of "behold." We are doubly blessed in this text.

The first appears very early with the surprising arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem ... (Matthew 2:1)

Their arrival created quite the disruption! Jerusalem was a major city, so it was used to having dignitaries visit. But these Magi had not come to engage in trade or political conversation. No, they came to worship a newborn King:

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:2)

The first behold comes with a question. And this question prompts two additional questions in my mind.

QUESTION #1: WHY DIDN'T EVERYONE SEE THE STAR?

*For **we** saw His star in the east ... (Matthew 2:2)*

WE saw. Evidently no one else did. It was bright enough and significant enough to prompt the Magi to leave their homes AND travel more than more than 9,000 miles ONE-WAY. It was bright enough to signal the exact location of the Christ-child, but no one else noticed it? Why not?

King Herod was so busy holding onto his power to think about anything else. He had pretty much sold out to the Romans in order to retain his throne, so the Jews didn't much care for him. And the Romans tolerated him only as long as there was peace in his territory. But he was incredibly insecure.

- He was almost insanely suspicious of those around him. This became even worse as he grew older.
- He created a list of trumped-up charges against the most influential people in the region, with orders they should all be executed for their crimes whenever he himself might die ... just in case there were any assassination thoughts among the group.
- To further ensure his grip on the throne, he had murdered his wife, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons.
- Caesar Augustus once said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son.

The religious leaders of the day were comfortable with the way things were. They were far more interested in their daily Temple rituals and their theological debates than they were about what the Scriptures had prophesied.

The people of the day were taking their cues from their religious leaders. Their lives were difficult enough already without making the priests angry.

The Magi were different. They knew the Scriptures. We believe they were a part of a group who had been taught the Scriptures back in the days of Daniel. They knew that the star signified the birth of a king, and they knew that king was the one the prophets had talked about. They were expecting this moment. They saw it because they expected it.

Only the Magi had hearts of expectation. It is one thing for us to pray that God would do something; it is something totally different to have a heart of expectation that God will respond to our prayers.

If you have listened to my prayers during the Advent and Christmas season, you know that I have been burdened about how those people who only go to church at Christmas and Easter will get the message of Christmas this year. All throughout my ministry I have targeted those two days in the calendar as key days for the church to tell the story of faith and to invite people to join the journey. So you have heard me pray that God would somehow get the story out to those who would not be coming to church.

Well, God sent the Christmas star. And if your heart was expecting God to do something, you knew why that star happened when it did.

QUESTION #2: WHY DIDN'T EVERYONE PURSUE IT?

The second behold prompts a second question:

After hearing the king, they went on their way; and behold, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the Child was to be found. (Matthew 2:9)

By this point in the story Herod knew the Christ had been born. The religious leaders knew. I'm sure word had begun to spread throughout the city. It always does. But only the Magi, made the 20 miles trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Why?

There are any number of reasons why people won't pursue an encounter with Jesus. You have heard a lot of them. At some point in your life, you may have used one or more of them. But in the end, all of them are pretty flimsy. And none of them will hold up when the end of life comes.

Rather than focus on those excuses, let us reflect on what the Magi experienced because they chose to pursue.

1. They saw firsthand the promise of God fulfilled.

Think about that. For thousands of years, Jewish men and women had been praying that God would send the Messiah. That request was part of the prayer ritual in every Passover celebration! Every time they felt the pain of persecution and the separation of another exile, they cried out, asking God to fulfill His promise.

But only the Magi got to see that promise firsthand.

2. They became the first Gentiles to worship the Jewish Messiah.

It is so interesting that the first worshippers included these Gentiles and a group of unclean shepherds. No Jew could have ever imagined that would be the case, but it was.

As I was preparing for the children's sermon, I came across this quote. You will recognize it from the point I made to the children:

Though there are still many questions about the Magi that may be left unanswered, we can determine that they brought a fourth gift that is often forgotten by many. After they laid their treasures down before Mary and Joseph, they worshipped Jesus. (This is the 4th Gift – the Worship of the King of Kings) These wise men from afar came not just to court favor but to proclaim that they believed Him to be the King of kings. The greatest gift that we can offer to Jesus this Christmas is our praise and worship."

3. They experienced incredible joy.

... they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. (Matthew 2:10)

That is such a wonderful use of the English language. They found Him. He really wasn't lost. But they finally connected.

There is great joy in that moment when people know for the first time they are in the presence of Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that there is great rejoicing in heaven whenever that happens.

4. They got to be a part of His story

This is the point I like the best. Because these Magi decided to pursue the star, they got to be a part of the story of Jesus. If they had seen the star, commented on its beauty, and stayed home ... we would never have heard of them.

APPLICATION

There is the application point today. When you and I come to Jesus ... when we have that encounter with Him ... when we realize that we are in the presence of the One who has come to save us from our sins ... and when we respond like the Magi ... bowing before Him and acknowledging Him as the King of kings, the promised One ... we too become a part of His story.

Are you a part of His story?

Amen.