

Epiphany – Year A – January 9, 2011

Based on Matthew 2:1-12, written by Pastor Paul Horn, Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

“Don’t follow the star. Follow the Scriptures to the Christ child.”

It’s a rare occurrence. There had not been an eclipse of the moon on the day of the winter solstice since 1638. But it happened a couple weeks ago, just before Christmas.

A lunar eclipse occurs when the earth passes between the sun and moon, blocking the sun’s rays from illuminating the moon and causing the earth’s shadow to move across the moon’s surface. The winter solstice is the day when the sun is at its southernmost point relative to the earth, meaning that for those in the northern hemisphere, darkness falls at about 5 p.m. and lingers until about 7:30 in the morning. The winter solstice, which always falls on or near December 22, marks the official start of winter and is the day with the fewest minutes of daylight in the whole year.

Neither the lunar eclipse nor the winter solstice is dependent on the other -- both occur on their own cycles -- but the fact that they coincided is worthy of note.

Because most of us live surrounded by artificial light and tell time by clocks, we have little experience with stargazing and sky-watching. Many of us rarely look at the sky. Our ancestors, however, looked at the sky not only to mark the change of the seasons, but also to try to understand what any unusual celestial happenings might foretell.

They should have seen this new, unusual star, and as a result of seeing it, Jerusalem should have been abuzz with all the excitement of New York City’s Times Square on New Year’s Eve! But they didn’t see it, and when it was pointed out to them, Jerusalem wasn’t excited. In fact, they were downright disturbed. Matthew tells us that King Herod the Great was disturbed at this news that a king had been born. Because of his paranoia of someone taking over his throne, Herod the Great had murdered his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, his uncle and many others. Jerusalem was disturbed because when Herod was angry, bad things happened. Not even the teachers of the law and the chief priests, men who had studied and taught the Scriptures for a living, paid any attention to this star and what it signified.

But these Magi paid attention to the star. Scripture doesn’t tell us that there were three of them or that they were kings or even that they came from the Far East (that’s tradition). What we do know is that they were most likely wealthy, well educated men, who were well acquainted with the movement of the planets and stars, and we know they came from a distant country. The main point is that they were Gentiles, non-Jewish people, people who should not have known about the significance of the star.

But it wasn’t the star that led them to Jerusalem. It was the Scriptures. They would not have left their country for Jerusalem if they had not read the Old Testament prophecies, specifically Numbers 24.17, “A star will rise out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel.” Another question people often ask is, “How did they know these Old Testament prophecies?” Remember that the Jews lived in exile in the lands of Persia for 70 years. When they were allowed to go home, many stayed behind. Remember also that Daniel and his three friends were members of the highest ruling courts of Persia. We can see through Scripture how these learned men may have obtained the Scriptures. But the star couldn’t lead them all the way the Savior. They needed the

Scriptures to explain this phenomenon. The star was the birth announcement, "A king is born!" Scriptures proclaimed, "The King of the Jews has arrived! He is King and Savior for all people."

The world marvels at a lunar eclipse falling on the winter solstice and wonders what it might mean. The world gets excited at pictures from the Hubble telescope of a new star forming or another galaxy that is discovered, and wonders how it happens or when it all began. The wonders of God's creation can lead an individual to seek God, and believe that a God exists, but it is not enough. The wonders of creation cannot lead them to their Savior. The world needs to be led by the Scriptures to the truth that these wonders are the work of God's hand, the One True God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Most importantly, the world needs to be led by Scripture to see that his God gave his Son's life for theirs. God's Word is the bridge that connects all these wonderful acts of creation to Christ and his cross. Without the Scriptures, we have nothing.

What bothers the world when they witness spectacular events, whether they are beautiful acts in nature or horrible catastrophes, is that they cannot wrap their human reason around it all, "Why does this happen?" The floods in California, tornadoes that killed over New Years weekend... even man made disasters, the horrors of war, a student in Ohio who started shooting at his high school, then turned the gun on himself, even though he was an outgoing, fun individual; a congresswoman is targeted by a gunman and six people die. Why did these things happen? Why do they continue to happen? The world looks at "the stars" and fails to make the connection using the bridge of Scripture. The world has no answers to these questions. Human reason cannot satisfactorily answer those questions.

Even as Christians we ask these same questions, "Why do I suffer? Why do my loved ones die so unexpectedly? Why are there natural disasters? Why is there war? As a Christian, I know I am forgiven, but why am I still plagued by the memory of past sins?" And the biggest question of all, "What purpose does all of this serve?" The "stars", that is, these signs, can only lead us so far. Without the Scriptures we do not know why they happen. They seem to have no purpose. Without Scripture we will be led to despair and hopelessness.

We need God's Word to explain to us that war, disaster, suffering and death happen as natural consequences of sin. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve to God's commands, sin came into the world. Sin is the reason why natural disasters happen. Sin is the reason why our bodies are full of disease and death. But we need the other part of Scripture to tell us that there is salvation from disaster, from war, from sin, from death. With the bridge of Scripture I can clearly see that these events occur to lead me back to the Scriptures where I clearly see that a ruler did come from the tribe of Judah, as God promised, who came to be a shepherd His people Israel, a shepherd king who laid down his crown for a cross. There in the Scriptures he shows me his cross, where I see a Savior who came to suffer for me, who came to remove the curse of sin, who came to die the death I deserve, who came to rise again to destroy the power that my grave once held over me, but no longer. I need the Scriptures to show me that God, through Holy Baptism, has graciously given me complete and absolute forgiveness of all of my sins, through this washing with water and his Word I am his child, and eternal life is given as a gift to me.

The star may have led the Magi to the exact house where the Christ child, now a toddler, and his mother Mary and father Joseph were living. But the Magi would not have known to start packing their camels if the Scriptures had not been shared with them. At some point in your life, someone shared the Scriptures with you, and you learned of God's love for you through his Son Jesus. At some point in your life, the Holy Spirit gave you the gift of faith, and through faith you put your trust in God's promise that he did indeed carry out his plan to save you, over 2,000 years ago.

Even though you know who your Savior is, and that you are going to heaven through faith in him alone, that your works merit nothing toward your salvation, the Scriptures still serve a purpose. Because we go back to the question, "What purpose does all of this serve?"

Scripture connects these crosses to the cross of Christ. If I have an easy and comfortable life, then I have no need to return to the cross of Christ and see that my whole life and my soul and my future depend on him. If I grieve over past sins, then I have an urgent need to run to Bethlehem to see the child, who lived with no sin in perfect obedience for me. If I suffer, then I know I need to run to the cross and see my Savior suffering for me, so that one day I may finally leave this life of suffering. If I lose loved ones to death, then I need to run to the empty tomb, and see that my Savior no longer lies there, but lives victorious over the grave, and know that my loved one, who died in the Lord, lives with him.

If I experience disaster through accident, disease, natural causes or war, then I have a need to run to my Savior and his Scriptures to hear him say to me, "Be still and know that I am God." (Ps 46) "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2Cor 12:9) "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom." (2Tim 4.18) "Nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (read all of Romans 8)

And if I behold the great wonders of creation and marvel at the work of God's hand in his world, then I have a great need to run to my Savior, fall down on my knees and worship him. If I behold the hand of God, graciously prospering me and sparing me from evil, then I have a need to run to him, and fall on my knees and thank him.

A star couldn't lead the Magi all the way to the Savior, but the Scriptures did. Look beyond the spectacular acts of nature or a string of exceptional experiences in your life to find God. You'll find him, as he promises, in the Scriptures. Amen.