

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We bounce around chronologically-speaking in the season of Christmas just completed, from the magnificent Old Testament promises of a coming Savior to the angel's surprising announcement to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to the humble birth of Mary's Son amidst ox and ass and an angelic pronouncement and the song of the angel choir.

On Christmas Day, we took a step farther back to the beginning and considered who this little baby boy born of Mary was — true God, the Father's Son, through whom all things came to pass — our life and our salvation.

From His birth, we fast-forwarded 40 days to the presentation of Jesus in the temple, but then rewound to the 8th day to consider Jesus' circumcision and naming. The next Sunday, we fast-forwarded again, this time 12 years forward to Jesus in the temple among the teachers. But today, we rewind back — back to the visit of the wise men — magi, they're sometimes called — back to the child Jesus, no longer an infant, but not a teenager, either.

The visit of the wise men This account is a part of the Christmas story. The wise men are often in our nativity scenes. They make their way into our Christmas carols and hymns like "The First Nowell" which our choir will sing today. It claims that the shepherds looked up first and saw the star that had risen in the east. Moreover, the star remained in the sky "day and night." (Scripture doesn't teach that at all.) But then the wise men saw it — by the way, the carol notwithstanding Scripture doesn't say how many wise men there were either: "And by the light of that same star, Three wise men came from country far; To seek for a king was their intent, And to follow the star wherever it went. Nowell, nowell. Born is the King of Israel." What Matthew tells us is: wise men saw the star that arose and went in search of the "*one born King of the Jews*" — it's part of the larger Christmas story.

Truly, the miracle star gets a lot of ink in this story, and it has piqued the interest of many. Theologically, that's understandable, for the Old Testament tells of "*a star [coming] out of Jacob, and a scepter [rising] out of Israel*" (Num.24:17) — but, of course, that prophecy is talking about Jesus. And when Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson says, "*nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising,*" the prophet is not talking about this star that rose in the east. He's talking about Jesus, whom John the Baptist's father Zechariah proclaimed was "*the sunrise [that] shall visit us from on high*" (Luke 1:78).

But Matthew tells us that a star arose and led the wise men to the child Jesus, and that star was not Jesus Himself. It was a light shining in the night sky. "*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 ... 'we saw his star when it rose.'*"

Before Christmas I was sent an article that sought to answer, from an astronomer's point of view, questions many have about the "Star of Bethlehem" as the author called it. The person who sent it prefaced it by saying, "during these times of discrediting the Bible, poo-pooing its truths, and using 'science' to make false assertions, it is refreshing to see a scientist using science to support a key Sola of the Christian Faith: Scripture as the inerrant word of God" ("The Star of Bethlehem From an Astronomer's Viewpoint," Dec, 20, 2021).

But it seems to me, the whole premise of the article is wrong. The assumption is that the event described in this account has to have a natural explanation, and so the author goes out searching for something that he thinks is plausible, something that is not miraculous. After all, the author says, "No theologian can say, in a way convincing to a scientist, that some event required an act of God outside natural law" (Craig Chester, "The Star of Bethlehem," *Imprimis*, December 1996, p. 6).

Is that so? What then of the miracles that Jesus did? They all happened "outside natural law." Is the next step trying to explain them by natural law and not take them to be the supernatural events described in the Scriptures? Does that uphold the inerrancy of Scripture?

Besides, this star did not act like any star I've seen in the sky, not even the bright planets that with the naked eye look like stars. Believe me, growing up on the farm far away from the city lights, I've seen plenty of stars, and they didn't act this way. What star appears for a time, then disappears, and then appears again as described? What star is able to go ahead of someone, leading him not to a particular city but to the child himself, coming "*to rest over the place where the child was*"? A star can't do that, nor can a wandering planet that looks like a bright star in the sky. No, this was no natural phenomenon; this was a miraculous appearance of a special light in the sky — it looked like a star and was described as a star, but it was no star or planet as this astronomer was trying to suggest.

In fact, this Christmas star — is it okay to call it that? — was all part of an amazing Christmas story filled with miracles: angelic announcements, God doing the impossible conceiving a Son in the womb of a virgin, an angry and hurt husband being dissuaded from divorce, the miraculous birth of the forerunner, the even more miraculous birth of the Son of God in lowliness, the herald angel's announcement to the shepherds, the bursting forth of the angelic choir.

And then, just in case you're not amazed enough, just in case you're sinful mind is starting to wander in disinterest, Matthew in our text exclaims: "*Behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.*" Behold, Scripture is being fulfilled: a star arose and shone in Jacob; a king was born in Israel, and Gentiles were drawn to His light by a light in the sky, drawn to "*the King of the Jews*" and, although they may not have realized it, to their Savior.

For that's who Jesus was born to be: God's agent of salvation, the light of the world, the life of men. And even though, this "*root and ... descendant of David, [this] bright morning star*" (Rev. 22:16) would be born king as the son of David and would "*reign over the house of Jacob forever*" (Luke 1:33), nevertheless, His coming was heralded as "*good news of great joy*" for "*all people*" (Luke 2:10), and the heavenly host sang of peace not just to Israel, but to all abiding in His favor (Luke 2:14). Simeon sang to us of the "*salvation ... prepared ... [for] all peoples,*" not just "*for glory to ... Israel,*" but also "*a light for revelation to the Gentiles*" (Luke 2:30-32). That's the message contained in the Christmas story: our salvation. The Father sent His only Son down from His side into human flesh to save the world.

Thus this story belongs in the Christmas story that continues today: "*Behold,*" magi come to Jesus bearing gifts; they wanted to worship Christ, the newborn King. "*Behold,*" Gentiles come to Jesus at God's own beckoning, by God's own guiding, that we might know that the same God who created the world also desired to redeem the whole world, Jews and Gentiles — that He desires all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), that He desires disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19), that He "*shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*" (Acts 10:34-35).

Isn't this why WE celebrate Christ's coming at Christmas. Isn't this the mystery that St. Paul talked about in our Epistle that is being fulfilled in the Christmas narrative: "*that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,*" that Gentiles are not God's afterthought, but are a part of His "*eternal purpose... realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,*" and that both Jew and Gentiles "*have boldness and access [to the Father] with confidence [only] through our faith in [Christ Jesus].*"

Thus, the Christmas story continues today as we hear of the coming of these Gentile wise men, offering up their kingly gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Their inclusion in the Christmas story is the story of our inclusion in it.

Indeed, the Christmas story continues for us all year long as we partake of Christ's word and sacraments — not a miraculous star shining in the sky, but "*a lamp shining in a dark place*" producing in us the miracle of faith, the dawning of the day and the rising of "*the morning star ... in [our] hearts*" (2 Pet. 1:19), and as we offer up in response our own gifts of gold, of bodies as living sacrifices in service of our neighbor, our acceptable worship (Rom. 12:1), and of lips that sing His praises (Heb. 13:15).

We pray: O God, let the Christmas story fill our hearts not only now but also all year long, that we may "Sing out! Ring out! Jubilation! Exultation! Tell the story! Great is He, the King of Glory!" (LSB395)

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.