

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Christmas season is officially over today. We are celebrating the Epiphany of Our Lord and the visit of the magi, men from the east bearing gifts for the infant Jesus. In that way, the Christmas narrative continues, and in that way, the nativity scenes we may have put up in our homes as part of our Christmas celebration have it right. The magi are a part of the Christmas story. Thus today, we'll hear the choir sing of the First Nowell, of the first Christmas, the birth of "the King of Israel," and they'll sing not only of the shepherds that visited the baby in the Bethlehem manger, but also of the wise men who saw the star that arose and went in search of the "*one born King of the Jews,*" for Balaam son of Beor foretold of it, "*a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel*" (Num.24:17), and Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson also foretold, "*nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*"

The Christmas narrative continues with the story of the magi, for that's the way Matthew introduces the story: "*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.'*"

Of course, to say that this is all part of the Christmas story is not to say that our nativity scenes have it all right, or the carols, for that matter. Our nativity scenes often telescope Jesus' birth, the visit of the shepherds, and the visit of the magi all into one scene. That is surely not entirely accurate. The shepherds would have been long gone by the time the magi arrived to worship Jesus; Jesus would not still have been surrounded by livestock or lying still in a manger.

If the star that got their attention arose at the birth of Jesus, it would have taken some time for these magi to travel from the east first to Jerusalem to inquire about Jesus, and then to find Jesus in his home — for that's where Matthew says they found Him. In fact, if Dr. Jeff Gibbs has it right as he tries to harmonize the birth accounts in both Luke and Matthew—and I think he makes a lot of sense—the holy family was probably living in Nazareth at the time of the visit of the magi. That's where Luke reports the holy family went to live after Mary's purification forty days after Jesus' birth. "*And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth*" (Luke 2:39).

That's probably why the star had to rise again and lead the magi to the infant Jesus. The scribes and chief priests rightly quoted from the prophet Micah and told the magi where the baby king was to be born, "You need only travel a short distance from here to tiny Bethlehem." The magi surely didn't need a star to lead them there. No, the star arose again to lead them north to the city of Nazareth

where Jesus and His family lived, and the star pointed the magi to Joseph's house there—not a stable, not a grotto, not to Jesus lying in a manger, but to a house, and this some time after Jesus had been born.

And you probably know other things that aren't quite right. There are usually three in our scenes; the Bible doesn't say how many came. "We three kings of orient are," we sing; they probably weren't kings. Our text translates *μαγοι* as "wise men"; they didn't seem all that wise or learned. In fact, Gibbs makes the case that everything they really come to know was revealed to them: where the king was to be born by Herod's chief priests and scribes, where the holy family was living by a star, of Herod's treachery in a dream. But, don't misunderstand. Don't go home and throw your nativity scenes out. Not at all, for this story IS still part of the Christmas narrative. It's like art that isn't always historically accurate, but conveys a narrative, the artist's message.

In fact, it's all part of an amazing, surprising Christmas narrative contained in both Matthew and Luke: angelic announcements, God doing the impossible conceiving a Son in the womb of a virgin, an angry and hurt husband who wants to divorce his seemingly unfaithful betrothed wife but doesn't, the miraculous birth of the forerunner, the hardship of travel to Bethlehem for a census — all so that Scripture might be fulfilled, the lowly birth, the herald angel's announcement to the shepherds, the bursting forth of the angelic choir, the fulfillment of a word of promise to a faithful man and his prophetic song.

And then, just in case you're not amazed enough, just in case your mind is starting to wander in sinful disinterest, Matthew in our text exclaims: "*Behold!*" "*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; Gentiles were drawn to His light and by His light 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 to be sure, 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,*" 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). And last Sunday, we heard Simeon sing 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 2:3-32). And that's the message contained in the Christmas narrative: our salvation. The Father sent His only Son down from His side into human flesh to save the world.

Thus the narrative 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].*”

So yes, the Christmas narrative continues today as we hear of the coming of these Gentile magi and their offering up of kingly gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. The story of their inclusion in the Christmas narrative is the story of our inclusion in it.

Indeed, the Christmas narrative 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 gifts of our gold, of our bodies as living sacrifices in service of our neighbor, our acceptable worship (Rom. 12:1), of our lips that sing His praises (Heb. 13:15)

Yes, the Christmas narrative continues, which is why we just sang out in joy and can do it all year: “O let the harps break forth in sound! Our joy be all with music crowned, Our voices gladly blending! For Christ goes with us all the way— Today, tomorrow, ev’ry day! His love is never ending! Sing out! Ring out! Jubilation! Exultation! Tell the story! Great is He, the King of Glory!”

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