

Sermon on Matthew 2:9
Community Christian Reformed Church, 7 January 2024
Rev. Tom Bomhof
The Star Came to Rest

Dear Friends of God,

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After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.
Matthew 2:9 (English Standard Version)

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Notice that strange idea there: The star rested. Most Bible versions use the word “stop”. The star stopped over the place where Jesus was. The word used here has the sense of ceasing movement. The star stood still. It did its job and then it rested. We wonder what that means. What kind of star rests?

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Matthew says, “And behold”, alerting us to the fact that this is no ordinary star. Behold. Take notice. Stop what you’re doing and pay attention here.

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The star rose up, moved and then rested. Right over the place where the child was.

In his magnificent commentary on the birth of Jesus, Raymond Brown points out that the picture of magi from the East noticing a star and then traveling to pay homage to a king and bring him royal gifts would not have struck Matthew’s readers as naïve or strange or romantic. Such things happened often in Greek and Roman culture. Signs in the sky were often interpreted as heralds of the birth of great people. The magi’s arrival, their story about a star, and Herod’s reaction would not be a surprise at all. It was to be expected for an important person. But Raymond Brown also adds this:

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While the motif of a star leading people to a destination is known in antiquity, the precision of leading to a house is unusual. - Raymond Brown, The Birth of the Messiah

I love how understated that is. The precision is unusual.

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This has been a puzzling element of the Christmas story for thousands of years. What kind of star rises, moves and then rests? What kind of star acts with such precision? Behold, says Matthew, take notice. This star is different than any other star you’ve ever seen. It moved and then it rested where Jesus lay.

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St. John Chrysostom in the late fourth century wondered aloud in a sermon about how it is possible that a heavenly star could mark the place of such small dimensions as a home on the earth:

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For by reason of its immense height, it could not sufficiently distinguish so confined a spot, and reveal it to those who were desiring to see it....How then, tell me, did the star point out a spot so confined, just the space of a manger and shed, unless it left that height and came down, and stood over the very head of the young child?

— St John Chrysostom (c. 349 – 407) The Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily VI. 3, 4

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Chrysostom wondered about the star's unusual precision. When you think about it, how could a star that is light years away possibly mark a specific location on the earth? If you look up in the night sky and see the brightest star in the western sky and then start walking, how will it tell you when to stop? If you walk fifty kilometers that star is still going to be in the western sky. If you walk fifty kilometers more, that star is still going to be in the western sky. How could it possibly point the way to something as small as a house? Who ever heard of such a star? Chrysostom concluded that the Star could not have been a natural phenomenon, but that it was an angelic appearance, or something like the Pillar of Cloud and the Pillar of Fire in the Old Testament.

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We're still quite baffled about what appeared in the sky. Since the time of Johannes Kepler in the seventeenth century, scientists have joined in the attempts to answer the question of the Bethlehem star. Careful attention has been paid to celestial phenomena in the decade prior to Jesus' birth. Was it a star at all? Or was it a comet or an asteroid or a supernova, or a convergence of planets? So far there has not been a definitive answer. I'm not counting on one, either. I don't think we'll ever know what this star was and exactly how it acted with such precision.

But we can know why it happened. We can know its purpose. We can know that this light in the sky was meant to lead important people to Jesus.

How many kids have played hot/cold? It's when your mom or dad hides something in your house, like a special gift on your birthday or some chocolate, and you have to find it. As you walk around your mom is saying "cold, cold—freezing!" That means you're far away from the hiding place. So you turn around and go the opposite way. Then she says, "warmer, warmer, hot, hot, boiling" and you look closely and there is the present.

It's kind of fun to get clues, hints, advice about how to find a nice thing. If you have to look all by yourself you don't always find it. You get frustrated, or you make a mess turning everything upside down and you have to clean it all up. It takes forever, and you might even give up. But when someone gives you hints about whether you're close or far away, it's so much better. Hot/cold is a good way to help you find something good.

The star was God's way of playing hot/cold with the wise men. On their own they would never have found out about the birth of Jesus or known where to look. These wise men were distracted and misled, looking for God in all the wrong places.

God sent them a sign and they followed it. God wanted these sinful, pagan magicians to find Jesus. These star gazers were not Bible believing, God following members of the covenant. They were outsiders to the people of God. They had odd beliefs. They practiced divination of the heavens. They believed that the position of the sun, moon and planets in the sky has an influence upon people and could foretell future events and reveal secret knowledge. They believed in astrology. They believed in horoscopes. They paid attention to the zodiac signs. All of these things are forbidden in the scriptures and considered detestable sins.

But behold, God spoke to *them*. He didn't wait until they had given up their astrology and magic and their odd beliefs. He reached down and invited these fearful, sinful astrologers to be the very first non-Jewish people to recognize Jesus as the king. He speaks their language, the language of stars that rise and move and rest. And amazingly, they listen and they act on this revelation.

And behold, the star rested over the place where Jesus lay. God is the God of revelation. In his grace he speaks to the hardest heart, to the mind lost in most anti-God thought, to the soul distracted by the sights that dazzle. And he speaks so precisely. Go here, to this house where Jesus is.

I wonder what the magi thought when they came across Jesus in an average home living with a poor family. He had no power or prestige surrounding him. He wasn't the son of a king who ruled over a land. He wasn't the son of a general in command of armies. He wasn't the son of a politician with influence. He wasn't the son of a rebel leader who sought a different kingdom. They found a poor, no-account baby in a poor, no-account family. Still, they bowed, worshiped, and gave their gifts to him because they found what God wanted them to find. They found the most unlikely of kings, whose rule is eternal and whose realm is over all things. They found the one who would truly upset the kingdoms of this world, who staged an unstoppable revolution in human hearts.

The star rested. Its work was done. We don't hear about that star again.

God still wants us to find Jesus. He still wants us to see this revelation of the light of the world. Maybe you've come looking. Maybe you're here because you're wondering that maybe this light of Jesus could shine in the dark places of your life, giving you a life you have always wanted. Maybe you're open to something new, something you've never considered before. Maybe you're the most unlikely of people to do that and yet you feel drawn. Maybe you're kicking and screaming against it, yet you are strangely drawn to this person, Jesus.

Now it's not a star, but Jesus who shines a light today, saying, come and find me. He illumines our hearts and shines a light in our darkness and draws us to himself. He still calls us to come and see, still calls us to bow down and worship, still calls us to come and follow. Come, walk in this light and find something new and life-giving. No matter where you come from.

Jesus also calls us to *be* his light when he calls us to live as children of God:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:14-16

Later in the Bible we'll hear this call again:

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Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.
Philippians 2:15-16

As we follow Jesus and allow his gospel to change us, we will shine for God and fulfill God's purpose in us.

Lesslie Newbigin was a life-long missionary to India, who came back to the UK only to find that the churches were fading and that he had to be a missionary in his home country. He wondered how secular, hardened people can come to faith in Jesus:

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How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?

And his answer:

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I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.

The only way to interpret the gospel, the only way to see the light of Jesus, is a congregation of men and women and children who believe it and live by it. That is how the light spreads. When you and I show how Jesus gives us peace and rest in our souls and joy in our life, we shine a light in the darkness. The church is *that* important.

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The Book of Matthew begins with foreigners from a distant land coming to worship Christ. It ends with a call to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And everything in the middle tells us that he is the saviour of the world sent from God to free us from our sin.

So when you sing about a star resting over Bethlehem, or when you see a star at Christmas on a tree or in a light display, think of how it led the wise men so precisely to Jesus. Thank God for his revelation to the world. The star rested when its work was done.

And also think of your calling. When you see a Christmas star, think of how God is calling you to shine as you follow Jesus, and who God is asking you to share the story of Jesus with this year.

The light has come into the world. Let the church and the whole creation proclaim it. AMEN