

For nine months, Zechariah couldn't say a thing. Nine months of scratching his thoughts on a tablet. Nine months of just having to listen. It might do us all some good. But at the birth of John, his voice is finally set free. And he opens his mouth—not to complain about how difficult it has been, but in prophecy. And this prophecy is a word for us today.

I won't read the entire thing. You can find it in Luke 1. Let me encourage you to read the whole thing this afternoon. But here is what he says about John the Baptist and about Jesus.

He says, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

To give light to those who sit in darkness. In Greek, this is the word *Epiphany*. In its verbal form, *Epiphany*, means *to appear, to give light, to reveal*. As John said so well in our Christmas Day text, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

This same term is regularly used—especially in the Pastoral Epistles—Timothy and Titus—to refer to the appearance of Christ—but at the end of human history. The Savior, hidden since His ascension, will one day be made manifest once again, this time with great glory. For us in Christ, this final epiphany is our blessed hope.

In 2 Timothy 4, Paul says, “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his *appearing*.”

In terms of the liturgical year, Epiphany comes after the 12 days of Christmas. In a sense, it is the Gentile Christmas. It refers to the appearance of the star in the east, leading the Magi to the Bethlehem home of the Christ Child. Now, technically, Epiphany was on Friday. Observing it today allows us to stretch out the days of Christmas just a little bit longer. I like that.

There is a great deal of misinformation out there about Epiphany—if people know about it at all. Some of the blame lies with the Christmas carol, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. You will notice that it is not in the hymnal. And, of course, it belongs with Epiphany more than Christmas. We tend to combine these two holy days, even though a couple of years separate the Nativity and the Epiphany.

But beyond the issues of timing, we know that the Magi were not exactly kings. They were kingmakers, they represented kings, they were counselors to kings. And Isaiah 60, our Old Testament text, should still inform our view of this matter.

In addition, Matthew never says they were a trio. There are three gifts. But we have no reason to think that their names are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. These names are simply mythology, nowhere present in Scripture.

The Magi were wise men—learned, influential, wealthy. But maybe not exactly like college professors or psychologists. They were public intellectuals—but of a certain kind. In

general, their profession was caught up in religious practices—astrology, necromancy, fortune telling, idolatry. Some of the Magi were certainly charlatans and scoundrels.

And generally, they weren't followers of the great wisdom of Solomon. They were not experts in the Hebrew texts of Job or Ecclesiastes or Proverbs. Magi were pagan sorcerers. Astrologers, occultists, conjurors—people that you would generally avoid—especially as you tried to stay ceremonially clean for temple worship.

We find this term *Magi* in the Greek form of Daniel for the magicians, the enchanters, and the astrologers of Babylon. And from the perspective of the Babylonians, Daniel is lumped in with them. The world has never really understood the one true religion. But there are reasons to believe that not all of the Magi were pagans.

Daniel and his three friends might very well have planted the seeds of Old Testament prophecy among the Babylonian Magi. This is how God's Word works. It makes surprising converts. We never know who will respond to the Word of God. But God's Spirit works when and where He wills through the Scriptures.

We know that Daniel had a copy of the book of Jeremiah while in exile. There are reasons to believe that he had access to all the Scriptures. And it is with this history in mind that Matthew tells us that Magi came from the East following a star.

But there is more to the back story. Of all the Gospels, Matthew is most intimately tied to the Old Testament. He assumes that his readers know the Old Testament Scriptures. And for us, it is best to fill in some of these details.

There are prophecies for the Epiphany. God tells us what He intends to do at this moment in human history. And He tells us hundreds—and even thousands of years in advance. Again, we heard the Isaiah 60 text as our Old Testament reading. How do you not read this text and be amazed with these prophetic details?

But there is more. We know that stars had significance for the Magi. The boundary between astronomy and astrology was vague. I am sure that many of them were quite confused on these subjects. But really, this star has nothing to do with your horoscope or with the practice of astrology.

This is about prophecy. And this is about the coming of Christ. And so, God spoke to them in ways that they could understand. He offered them an opportunity to respond to an ancient prophecy coming true right in front of them.

The prophecy is from Balaam. It's from 1400 BC. And Balaam probably belongs in the same category as the Magi. He is a pagan philosopher and prophet. And he is hired to announce a prophecy against Israel—a curse. But God won't allow it. He won't even let him say anything false. Balaam is forced to give a true prophecy. This prophecy has implications for his own time and Israel's conflict with Moab. But clearly God intends something more.

Here is what he says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." And just maybe it is this prophecy—tied with the Bethlehem star—that drives the Magi to seek out the newborn King of the Jews.

We know that as they arrive—first in Jerusalem—the Jewish priests and scribes point them to the Micah prophecy, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be

among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

And the Magi handle these Scriptures as God’s Word—as texts with authority. And if they knew of Daniel, they knew he had predicted, with some specificity, the birth of a royal Deliverer in Israel. He had even made the time frame evident. And thus, with all of this in mind, when they saw the mysterious star pointing them toward Jerusalem, they followed.

God called the Magi to Himself. They would be the first of multitudes of Gentiles that would turn to Jesus—that would come and worship Him. They traveled great distances—following the light for long months. The light captivated them. It brought them hope. And finally, the light would chase away the darkness.

These Magi—as misguided as most of them were—got this one thing right. Really, they got the most important thing right. Something huge had happened in Bethlehem of Judea. And they left it all—home, family, careers—and they went to find Him. It is the only right response. Much better than Herod, Jerusalem, the chief priests, the scribes.

Call this a pilgrimage if you want. But perhaps it is best just to call it faith. As Christ enters the world to bring His gospel to the world, the Christian faith calls us to leave everything and find Him. And now that we have found Him, to bring our gifts, and kneel and worship Him. This is the Epiphany. The light has come.

And as much as I would call on you to admire the Magi in this story—as much as I would encourage you to emulate their faith—we have to see that the story of the Magi is first about Christ seeking us. It is about Christ bringing His light to Gentile sinners like us. It is about Christ finding us—saving us. The light comes first—the prophecies come first—the star comes first. And then—and only then—do the Magi respond.

There are so many commands for us in Scripture to seek the truth, to seek Christ, to seek His kingdom. These are all valid commands. And let’s do that with our whole heart just like the Magi. In fact, this is what life is all about. The first commandment is the first commandment for a reason.

And we could really use a return to the wisdom of God—to be wise men and women—especially the wisdom that we find in the Proverbs. Our relationships and lives would benefit so much from spending a little time each day in the Proverbs. The book has 31 chapters. And thus, the book fits nicely into a daily reading plan, getting through the book in a month.

And if I can encourage you to make a New Year’s resolution it would be this. Seek Christ as the true wisdom of God. And seek Him where He has promised to be found. See the church as your weekly pilgrimage. Let’s be faithful to this place and see every Sunday as our holy day.

And find Him in His Word. Spend time everyday listening to the voice of Christ in the Scriptures. This is just what it means to be Christian. This is where you will find His light. We confess with the Psalmist, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

But let’s see Christ in all of this. The call to search and seek and find are commands to people He has claimed and chosen as His own. Only those that He finds—only those He makes His own—will obey Him. He creates our willingness. He recreates our seeking. He

gives what He commands. We have found remarkable light in this gospel account. But there is nothing for us to be proud about here.

“Wise men still seek Him” or so the slogan goes. This is very true. But apart from the work of Christ, we will never see the kingdom of God as much of anything. It will all seem pretty irrelevant. Pretty dull. Pretty out-of-date.

The Magi didn’t choose Christ, Christ chose them. You didn’t choose Christ, Christ chose you. As Jesus Himself says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.” And again He says, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” And this is good news.

Today is Epiphany. And we find that the light of Christ shines in our hearts. And the darkness of sin and error and false religion fade away. He announces His coming in the ancient prophets—Balaam, Isaiah, Micah. He announces His coming through Zechariah. He announces it through the light of a rogue star. And He draws some unlikely converts to Himself. Magi. Gentiles. People like us.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you...And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*