

Star Words

Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14

Matthew 2:1-12

Jan 7, 2024 Epiphany

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Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.
In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.
For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

There is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his wife went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a football game, when the kids came into the room.

"Dad, we have a play to put on. Do you want to see it?"

He really didn't want to, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.

His four children, four, six, eight, ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillow under her pajamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.

Finally the last child, the eight year old, came out, with all of the jewelry on that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. "I am all three wise men," she said. "I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud."

The father didn't laugh. The father didn't correct the wise man. The father reflected on the word that somehow got to the heart of the Christmas story: God loves us for who we are, our gold--where we are at our best; our circumstances--where we might be even now, even our mud--where we are when we are most human.ⁱ

After Jesus was born, it was not the local folk, the Jewish people who have been waiting for a Messiah, to whom Emmanuel, God-with-us, is first revealed, but rather to the wise men, to Magi from the East. They were foreigners, strangers. They were outsiders with special skills and wisdom to interpret prophecies, astronomers to read the night sky for important signs and to understand the messages of dreams. They were among the best and brightest people, the powerful and the important people, of their time.

When Jesus was born, it was not in the grand holy city of Jerusalem, with its stunning and impressive temple at the heart and center of religious, political, and economic power, but rather in the lowly, little village and muddy backwater flat of Bethlehem, and in circumstances of overcrowding, unsanitary and unhealthy conditions, oppressive rule, and injustice.

And it was not the imposing and powerful King Herod on whom God's anointing rested, nor on the heroic warrior the people had long been anticipating, but on a little boy, a young, vulnerable child-Messiah who had not even yet learned to talk, to walk, yet he was the one born to 'save his people from their sins,'ⁱⁱ and to shepherd God's people Israel.

And so these particular Magi came, following a path that a long line of wise ones had been following since the time of Daniel the prophet, 600 years before. It had been King Nebuchadnezzar who had assigned the prophet Daniel to the high office of "chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and diviners,"ⁱⁱⁱ as there was a deep and strong belief that signs in the heavens portended great--or terrible--things to come. Some unusual movement or stellar event of great magnitude was often thought to herald the birth of a king or someone else who would do extraordinary things. The Magi of the first century would have studied the writing of Daniel, and possibly other Jewish writings with which Daniel would have been associated, such as the book of Isaiah. Their studies led to the expectation for a Jewish king to arrive in Judea near the end of the first century BC. They understood the timing of the Messiah's birth and the sign that would lead them to the place where he would be born.

"We have observed his star at its rising." The Magi must have had an unmistakably clear astronomical understanding that urged and convinced them to travel a long, dangerous journey of over a thousand miles to Jerusalem to look for this new king by following the significant star.

We do not know the actual ethnicity or faith of the Magi but they were most likely priests and wise men among the Medes, Persians, Zoroastrians, and Babylonians.^{iv} Whatever their background, they followed the brilliant and blazing star to the Christ child. They sought him out, came to worship him, and to bring gifts—gifts of gold that symbolize deity and royalty,

frankincense used in worship to God as it symbolizes service, and myrrh, a fragrance used in preparing a body for burial.

Today it is our turn to follow a star:

to bring our gold—the best of who we are and what we have—for the worship of God and for service to God’s people and creation

to bring our circumstance—to know that no matter where we are on our life’s journey, no matter what doubts or questions or joys and expectations, God walks each step with us and to *bring our mud*—to accept that no matter how much we are struggling, burdened, fearful or broken, God is with us in the depths and the midst of it all.

The heart of the Christmas story is also the heart of the Epiphany story: God loves us for who we are, our gold—where we are at our best; our circumstances—where we might be even now, even our mud—where we are when we are most human. Follow the star you have received today, let it lead you to discovering God in an unexpected way, to responding to God in a new light, and to worship God with your gifts.

Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, guide us to Thy perfect light.
Amen.

ⁱ Bishop Ken Carter, https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002f67/call_and_response

ⁱⁱ Matthew 1:21

ⁱⁱⁱ Dan. 5:11

^{iv} <https://tifwe.org/how-the-mystery-of-the-magi-impacts-our-faith-and-work/>