

There's Bethlehem  
Sunday, January 5th, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of  
Marshalltown, Iowa

Scriptures: Numbers 24:17; Matthew 2:9-12

Introduction: When I was a boy running a paper route for the Des Moines Register I remember one year, during the Christmas season, when the paths of the moon and a prominent star came close enough to make it one large bright object in the sky. The papers quoted scholars speculating that this might have been the bright object that attracted the Wise Men from the East after the birth of Jesus. I don't know, but I find that the episode of our Lord's infancy is striking in its symbolism, even if we're not sure exactly what it was.

Set the stage

Sometime after the birth of Jesus three scholar/astrologer/priests from somewhere in what is modern-day Iraq or Iran caused a stir in the court of Herod, claiming that they were following the star of the new king of the Jews. This caused quite a stir, and Herod, ever the shrewd strategist, took them aside and asked them to inform him when they located the child. The wise men were later warned by God in a dream not to trust Herod, and they returned to their country after finding the holy family, never to be seen again.

Which is more important, what it was or what it meant?

What exactly did the wise men follow? Some, like the scholars interviewed when I was a boy, speculated about a combination of the light of a star and the moon. Other scholars have suggested a meteor or a comet. Chinese astronomers have suggested a supernova may have taken place. I feel that God may have done something supernatural, specific for that time and place, in a manner that would have gotten the attention of wise men living far from Israel. But perhaps even more important than the identity of the star, is the meaning. Everything in the Bible happens for a reason. What was the point to this?

Stars are potent because they are symbolic

People of ancient times would have been keen to notice the symbolism of stars. Stars long represented the guardian angels of great people or royalty, and the wise men would have been well aware of this. The wise men, or Magi, may very well have been a group that studied astrology, nature and medicine that dated back to the Babylonian empire. Daniel, the Biblical prophet, may have been part of such a group and they, after all these years may have known about Daniel's prophecies, and other prophecies of the Old Testament. One significant one would be Numbers

24:17, "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult." A prediction from that shifty character Balaam that was fulfilled to an extent with King David, but pointed beyond him to the Messiah. That, and other prophecies, connect the symbolism of stars to the person of the Messiah, the Son of God. Numbers is found early in the Bible, but Jesus is called the "morning star" in Revelation 22:16. The "morning star" came up just before dawn and it signified that travelers caught on the dangerous open road at night had survived. It came to symbolize hope, and a star over the cradle of Jesus symbolized that He is the hope of the nations.

One other significance to the symbol

There is more. Of the several verses that tie Jesus as Messiah to the beauty of a star there is one that does the same for His faithful followers. At the end of the Book of Daniel is this cryptic statement: (Daniel 12:3) "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever." Those who walk in wisdom and help others to the path of righteousness are symbolized by stars, in that they will shine forever.

Application: The star reminds you of the identity of the baby, and of the sort of person you were designed to be. It reminds us that God uses ordinary people in very ordinary places. I once heard a wise man say that what really matters in a life well lived is not events and projects that bring fulfillment and happiness, but rather acts of righteousness. Nothing is wrong with fulfillment and happiness. Travel, education and events that fulfill priorities and passions are good, but acts of righteousness that bring happiness and fulfillment to others are even more valuable. They don't have to be great acts, God came to earth and moved into a small town with ordinary lives. God works in small towns, ordinary lives, and in small acts today.

Conclusion

Long ago, three mysterious wise men traveled a long way to say, "there's Bethlehem, the place for which we have searched." They followed a star, and the makeup of the star may be less important than its symbolism. It meant that this baby is the Hope of the nations, that His followers will be people who shine like stars, that simple acts in small towns can have eternal significance. The star over Bethlehem represented our Lord, and it represents us, if we follow Him well.

