



## “The Rising Light”

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*Matthew 2:1-12*

“I had almost forgotten about how obnoxious cicadas could be in Tennessee until the insects started screeching at full force just before the sky fell dark.” That was a quote from one of the millions of folks who saw the solar eclipse in Nashville, Tennessee this past August. You know, Nashville is where I grew up, and Amanda, the girls and I decided to experience the eclipse’s totality with my parents. At about 2 o’clock, we went to the top of a parking deck to make sure we were on a flat surface, not obstructed by trees or buildings. We wanted a clear view of the events that would transpire –seeing the sun’s corona, viewing the diamond ring effect, witnessing Bailey’s beads, and seeing sun snakes. And it wasn’t only the bugs letting us know that totality was about to happen, I also watched the birds settle down and flock to their nests as they anticipated the oncoming night. The light dimmed as if we were sitting in a movie theater preparing for the featured film to begin. The sky turned shades of gray with a pinkish, purple ring hugging the horizon, all the way around us, 360 degrees. Streetlights came on and we experienced the cool chill of evening in the middle of the day. Totality! Then, a few minutes later, the black disc of the moon completed its path and the light and heat of the sun returned to the Tennessee sky. And yes, we did get the T-shirts to prove we were there.

Shooting stars, comets, and the movement of planets have fascinated people throughout time. From solar and lunar eclipses, to meteor showers, to comets and constellations we love when the sky is clear and we can witness the celestial bodies dancing in the heavens. For centuries, we have been enthralled by what happens above us, in the realm of the divine. But people have not only been fascinated by the movement of planets and stars, they have also been afraid of what they saw in the heavens, afraid of what the heavens were trying to say to us. When we see unusual phenomenon in the sky, we often ask questions: “What does this mean?” “What does this mean for us as a nation?” “What does this mean for our leaders?” “What does this mean for our faith?”

Change in the heavens has often signaled change on earth. Roman historians reported that a comet foretold the death of Caesar Augustus. When a comet traveled over Boston, Massachusetts in 1680, Cotton Mather, a Puritan preacher and scientist, warned the citizens that the comet was an omen, a calling from God for the immoral town to repent and get right with God while they still had chance. It was an effective technique – the blending of science and religion – and the town repented and shaped up... for a couple of years.

In the 1960’s and 70’s the ancient practice of astrology and horoscope reading had a strong resurgence and the pick-up line “what’s your sign?” became as popular as the song “Aquarius.” On March 26, 1997, police discovered the bodies of 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate cult, who had participated in mass suicide in order to reach what they believed was an

extraterrestrial spacecraft following the Hale-Bopp comet. And if you watched the news this summer, you probably saw religious leaders talking about how they thought the 2017 solar eclipse marked the beginning of the “end of days” and a call for national repentance.

It is with these stories of awe, wonder, and fear that we approach the Gospel text for today about the guiding star from the East and the magi who saw strange happenings in the sky. And I refer to them as magi because they weren't the three kings we all sing about. In fact, we don't really know how many magi followed the star and journeyed to Jesus. We only get from the text that they brought three kinds of gifts with them (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). Some scholars speculate that there could've been 6, 8, or even 12 travelers.

And they weren't kings either. The Greek term used to describe the magi has a multitude of possible meanings, none of which suggest royalty or kingly status. The word can refer to Persian priests, astrologers, and even magicians, hence the name magi. These ancient magi were persons thought to be skilled in astronomy as well as various occult arts, such as the interpretation of dreams, fortune telling, and magic. In this gospel text, they are clearly thought of as astronomers or astrologers, who found the rising of a star to be of historical significance because it was a common idea in the ancient world that the birth or death of great leaders was accompanied by heavenly signs.

The many magi who are said to have come from the “East,” give the Christmas story an inclusive and international flavor. Scholars today believe that Judah's eastern neighbors may have been influenced by Jewish expectations of a coming Messiah and that those people of other lands and religions were drawn to Jesus through the rising star and the birthed baby. God was speaking to the hearts and minds of all people, even those outside of Israel.

But there is more than meets the eye in the identification of these magi as from the “East”. The word used for “East” in our text today is *anatole*, which means “the rising,” more specifically, the rising of the sun, which is from the East. The word *anatole* would have had a number of resonances for the first Greek-speaking Jews listening to Matthew's story. First, the rising of the sun in the East suggests the imagery of light, which is often associated with salvation and redemption in the Bible. We see this all the way back in the prophecies of Isaiah when he says, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” The verb for “has risen” in Isaiah is from the same root as *anatole*.

We also see the rising of light in the book of Numbers which speaks of a star that will rise out of Jacob. The people of God were waiting for a Messiah and it was easy to see how a star, a heavenly body, could become a symbol for the coming of a savior. And the people of God understood the star of Bethlehem against the backdrop of these early prophecies. The star, for the Jewish people in the ancient world and for us today, indicated that the Messiah had arrived. And the Gospels, too, continued to compare Jesus to the light that was rising. Matthew commented on Jesus' appearance in Capernaum by saying he was a light shining on those who dwelt in darkness and Luke spoke of the “dawn (*anatole*) from on high” that “will break upon us,” to give light (an epiphany) to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”

These biblical texts have undoubtedly been used to represent the coming of light, of the Messiah, and of salvation to the world. And the magi represented all nations, in all the world, including us, who would come to worship the Christ-child, the rising light, the Son of God. And that is why King Herod was so angry and so afraid at the mysterious celestial event that brightened the night sky. The star of Bethlehem revealed to a greedy and violent ruler that God's love was for all people, of all races, of all kingdoms.

And, as the gospel shows, Herod wasn't the only one who looked at that star and saw something ominous in the sky. The text says that all of Jerusalem agreed with him. That star was troubling, it was a powerful sign. The heavens were trying to tell the people something. So, when we hear that Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, it makes sense. Because when the skies go dark, when huge glowing comets trail the horizon, and when the heavens themselves begin to defy the laws of nature, there is no telling what is about to happen.

Pastor Maxwell Grant of Second Congregational United Church of Christ in Greenwich, Connecticut, preached a sermon on this "troubling star" and noticed not only the ominous nature of celestial happenings as representing a collapse of constellations in the heavens but also a collapse of worldly constellations – constellations of power, constellations of privilege, constellations of the possible and the impossible, of what we can imagine and what we've come to expect. And if all that collapses, how will we know what to do and how to act? Will we be like the chirping cicadas and the nesting birds? Will we need to change the way we see the world when that star, that light, that sun, rising in the east, leads to a new kind of king, a king that is not Herod? A king that rules by the example of his own death rather than the ordering of deaths of the baby boys. A king that will be a rising star over a humble bed, a rising branch of Jesse on the stump of hurting remnant, a rising sun on the people that live in darkness, and the Son of God rising on a cross at Calvary, a divine light shining over the entire world.

This troubling star declared that Herod did not have the corner on power and authority and that you and I do not have a corner on God's love or God's light. God loves everyone in the world just as much as God loves you and me. And because we have the rising light in our lives, we can be assured that we have light in the midst of the dark places in our lives. Because I know that life continues to be overwhelmingly dim and harsh. And, I know, we try to light our little candles of peace, hope, joy, and love at Advent, realizing they are so terribly fragile, they are so easily blown out. Today I am healthy and tomorrow I am in the hospital. Today I am smiling and tomorrow the sadness hits. Today I am comfortable and tomorrow I am struggling to make ends meet. Today I am a success and tomorrow I feel like a failure. Life's little candles are so fragile and easily extinguished.

But there is one light that is never put out. There is one light that always shines in the darkness. There is one light that darkness cannot overcome. There is one light that rises and illuminates our lives. And that light is Jesus Christ. And we must keep our eyes, our hearts, and our journeys focused on that eternal light of Christ. And, when we do, we can hear the words of Isaiah, "Rise. Shine. Get up. Your light has already come." Get up. Get going. Go. Rise. The light of God has already come to your life. When you are lost, you have a rising light. When you are afraid, you have a rising light. When you are alone, you have a rising light. When you are suffering, you have a rising light. You have a rising light to follow!

As we begin the New Year, the rising light lets us know that there is still a journey to take, that there are first steps toward a future that might seem dim, scary, and unknown. But let us be as the magi, following that yonder star, the rising light, the holy Son of God that rose on the cross for us, and know that everywhere the light shines brings birth, brings joy, and brings peace.

Amen