

Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen
upon you. and your daughters shall be carried on
their nurses' arms.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall
be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to
you.

³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your
dawn. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and
Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the
LORD.

⁴Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to
you;
your sons shall come from far away,

Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

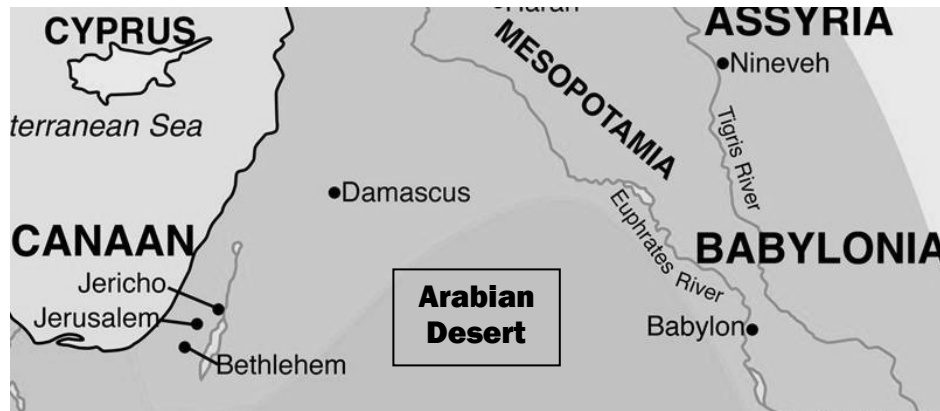
In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'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.'"
⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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." ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

They didn't have to make the trip. These magi could have stayed home, stayed comfortable, and relied upon others to learn more about the meaning of the unusual star hanging over the western horizon.

A long and difficult journey

We get the timing of this story all wrong. Our Christmas pageants and nativity sets have shepherds, animals, angels, Mary, Joseph, and three kings with camels -- all gathered around the baby Jesus. But this can't be right. Even if the star had appeared over Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' conception rather than his birth, and the wise men

had begun their journey that very day, they still might not have arrived in time for the birth.



Israel lies on the western side of the Jordan River which sits in a great rift valley. On the eastern side of the river sits the Arabian desert. Thus, as is evident from the map above getting from Babylonia to Bethlehem necessitated going north along the Tigris and Euphrates and then southwestward through Syria into Galilee and then south to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles. At times the magi and their retinue would have traveled through areas

Who were these “wise men?”

“Wise men” in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. It is why they are sometimes referred to as the “magi.” But these *magoi* were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Persia or Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Persian and Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events.

Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Of course, in Matthew, it is just a star – not even a “bright” one.

Whatever the star actually was, these magi saw in the “star” a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born! – and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

plagued with bandits. At other times, they would have passed through sparsely populated lands that offered little to eat or to drink. It would have been so much easier for them simply to stay home and wait for someone else to bring them whatever good news there might be. After all, they were men of great learning, prestige, and power. But despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the long journey, they chose not to stay, but to go.

The star was there for all the world to see, but only these wise men went.

An uncertain destination¹

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, they only had a vague idea where they were headed. Indeed, chances are that Bethlehem was a most unexpected destination.

In Jesus’ day, large communities of Jews still lived along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was once the center of the vast Babylonian empire. These Jews were the descendants of those who had chosen not to return to Jerusalem after the end of the exile in 538BC. The Book of Esther is set in just such a post-exilic Jewish

¹A recent essay by Walter Brueggemann, “Off by Nine Miles,” helped me to see the connections to Isaiah 60. It was published by *Christian Century* magazine and can be found on-line at www.christiancentury.org.

community in Persia (the successors to the Babylonians). Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that these three learned men were familiar with the great Hebrew Scroll of Isaiah.

Isaiah 60 speaks of a time when Jerusalem would be restored to greatness and wealth, when kings would come in procession, when other peoples would bring gifts of gold and silver, frankincense and myrrh. As 60:1 has it, there would be a light shining so brightly that all the world would see it.

Who was King Herod?

The Herod family plays a prominent role in the New Testament. Herod the Great tries to murder Jesus and one of his sons participates in the crucifixion. However, the New Testament Herods can be confusing because there are two of them by name and a third called Philip! (see Luke 3:1)

The Herod at the time of Jesus' birth (about 6BC) was Herod the Great, the founder of the family dynasty. In the struggle for control of Judea nearly forty years before Jesus' birth, Herod had backed the right horse – the Romans, who had first been invited into Judea more than twenty years earlier. As a reward for his support, the Romans gave Herod the title of King, even though Rome's power was wielded through a governor (e.g. Pilate, decades later).

So far as the Jews were concerned, Herod the Great was a pretender to the throne. He set about to win the people's devotion by launching a massive rebuilding of the temple. His architects and builders removed a portion of the mountaintop and built a structure into which we could have fit twenty-five football fields. In Jesus' day, the project was still underway. It was finished just in time for the Romans to destroy it in 70AD in the great war.

Despite his rebuilding program, Herod the Great was never able to earn the affection of the Jews. They still awaited a true king, anointed by God and from the House of David.

When Herod the Great died in 4BC or so, soon after ordering the murder of the infants in Bethlehem, his sons assumed control of various portions of Herod's "kingdom." One of these sons, Herod Antipas, "governed" Galilee and is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and played a key role in Jesus' trial.

Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. And where do they go? To King Herod's grand palace. Where better to find a new king than at the palace, the seat of power and wealth. Imagine the magis' surprise when a few of Herod's biblical scholars dug up the reference to Bethlehem as the place to find this new king. In terms of wealth and power, Bethlehem was dusty and inconsequential, worlds away from Herod and Jerusalem, though only about five miles down the road to the southeast. Surely, the magi never expected to find the child in such a place. Yet, their surprise did not diminish their joy. Perhaps it even heightened their sense of awe and wonder. It was a world turned upside-down by the unexpected power of God.

Our journey

The Christian journey is long and often difficult. Making one's way on this journey requires an adequate vision of the destination. We need to see the world as God sees it as we make our way forward. And it is Christ who is our light.

It is a long journey in that we are "now" people and don't appreciate that the retraining of our souls takes time. It is difficult in that we often fail to grasp that the retraining moves forward, not out of our successes but out of our sufferings, large and small. Though our destination is certain, for Christ is certain, we often see it only dimly and, sometimes, not at all. But we do not journey alone, for not only is God with us each step, we are accompanied by countless Christians. Surely, this is one reason that God has given us the gift of the Church, the Body of Christ, but that is a topic for another day.

“Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come”

Today’s passage from Isaiah will be much more meaningful to us if we put in some context.

Isaiah was a prophet who brought God’s word to the southern kingdom of Judah more than 700 years before Jesus. Perhaps no other writing prophet has influenced Judaism and Christianity more than Isaiah. However, it is very likely that Isaiah did not write the entire book that you and I know as the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called “First Isaiah,” chapters 1-39, was written by the prophet Isaiah more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Isaiah warns the people of Judah that the same ruin will befall them unless they turn back to God. Judah’s fall is not immediate. Nonetheless, Jerusalem burned to the ground about 150 years later.

There are passages of hope in “first Isaiah” as well. Some of Isaiah’s messages look ahead to a time when all of God’s people would be restored under God’s rule. The prophet looked ahead to the coming of God’s kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the exile, after the Babylonians overran the kingdom and burned Jerusalem and the temple in 587BC. It is hard to overstate the darkness of the exile. In the midst of the Jews’ crushing pain and despair, another prophet, writing in the name of the great prophet Isaiah, brought the Jews comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God’s rule.

Thus, the reference to the “ruins of Jerusalem” in verse 9 is concrete. The Jews looked forward to the day when God would come to their rescue, when he would “bare his holy arm.” On that day, God would roll up his sleeves and get to work. All the world would see that God is God. Can we even imagine a bigger day!

Thus, the prophet uses an image of lookouts posted on mountains. The lookouts are to signal the instant that God appears on the horizon. God is riding to rescue not only his people, but all the world. “The ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” The fact that passages from Isaiah such as this one were written during the exile makes them immeasurably more real and meaningful to me.

It is an expression of God’s love that the most hopeful images of God’s kingdom were written during Israel’s deepest darkness.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It isn’t very hard for most of us to grasp that the Christian life to which we are each called is a journey. Nonetheless, it can be difficult for us to grasp the realities of this journey. First, our world is focused upon the moment, the near-term. What will happen to our stock price, this quarter? What will be my grades, this term? How will I pay the bills, this month? . . . How do we avoid letting our Christian journey get swamped by the immediate? How do we learn to appreciate the pace of the Christian life? We expect our problems to be fixed NOW. What are some practical steps for keeping the longer view in our minds and hearts as we set about, with God’s help, to restrain our souls? How is the Church part of our journey? How is St. Andrew part of your own journey? How could St. Andrew, the institution, and St. Andrew, the thousands of members, be more helpful and more comforting on your own journey.

What is our destination? You might discuss, not our eternal destination of a fully restored relationship with God and a re-embodied life, but our destination in *this* life. What is our journey’s goal in *this* life? How might the journey shape the goal? Do we all have the same destination or goal?

1. Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Matthew 1:1-18 Jesus' genealogy. It is in three parts, each with 14 named generations. What might this tell us? Can you find the four women in the genealogy?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 1:18-25 The birth of Jesus</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 2:1-12 The visit of the magi</p>	<p>Thursday, Matthew 2:13-18 The escape to Egypt and the slaughter of the children under the age of two.</p>
<p>Friday, Matthew 2:19-23 The return from Egypt</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

