



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Stars In Plain Sight”

Part VIII of the Sermon Series “Advent in Plain Sight”

Psalm 8 and Matthew 2:1-6

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During the 11:00 o’clock worship service, a number of young people will profess their faith and become full adult members of the church. To prepare for this day, they have attended Confirmation classes. This sermon will serve as a sort of last lesson before they are confirmed. It is a sermon about reading scripture.

We already heard our Old Testament Lesson when we read responsively a portion of Psalm 8 as our *Call to Worship*. Listen now for God’s Word in the reading of a passage most often read on this Sunday, *Epiphany Sunday*.

Matthew 2:1-6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They 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.’”



I live on Stanley Ave. I am an early riser, though sometimes I sleep in till after 5:00. I love to look out the windows when the sun first rises after a night of snow. I particularly like the sight of bare tree branches in contrast to the white canvas. The view is both beautiful and cold.

There is a sight I love even more. It comes a few hours later when children sled down the Newhoff Hill or families build snowmen in their front yards. The view is both beautiful and warm.

Looking up to the night sky can be a cold or a warm vision. I recently saw the Netflix movie, *Don't Look Up* and there comes a point in the story when *to look up* is to see approaching doom; a meteor headed straight for earth. That's a cold view.

We heard a warm view when we read the verses from Psalm 8 in our *Call to Worship*. The poet who wrote those verses contemplates his existence as one who is caught “[between God and the beasts of the field.](#)”¹ What he writes is like a first morning shower; the water turns from cold to warm.

Cold:

When I look at the heavens and see the moon and the countless stars, who am I?
How could the artist who painted these lights in the canvas of night even notice mere mortals who look on them?

Warm:

Yet I already know that you, the Creators of all that is, made mortals a little less than angels. And I know already that you care for us.

How is it that people can look at the night sky and have different reactions?

Fact is, many a stargazer can appreciate the beauty of the starry sky, but cannot see anything but empty space and empty meaning?

Starry starry night

Paint your palette blue and gray

Look out on a summer's day

With eyes that know the darkness in my soul.

Even physicists have different reactions to their study of the sky and what it means. Some sense God, some do not. It is not the science, on which they agree. It is outlook, something inside the scientist.

I am suggesting that why some people see the stars and are warmed and others see stars and are chilled has to do with who is looking.

Our New Testament passage is a case-in-point. Hearing the passage is the opposite experience of hearing Psalm 8. With the Matthew passage, it is like when I was a boy and took a shower *after* two of my brothers or one of my sisters has taken one. Usually right when my head is fully lathered, the water turns from warm to cold.

¹ McGrath, Alister E., *Surprised by Meaning*, WJK, 2011, p. 108.



The passage begins warm when the magi looks up and sees a star as a sign of hope and promise. The Magi are *not Jewish*, and star-study is part of their very *un-Jewish faith*. It is a bit of a shock that the writer of Matthew's Gospel, which takes such pains to explain how Jesus is

- the expected Messiah,
- the anticipated Son of David,
- the fulfillment of the Jewish Law

would include in at the very beginning of the Gospel a story that casts in such a favorable light these strange, foreign, Gentile figures. Perhaps it is an early indication that Matthew sees Jesus as good news not only for Jews but also for the world.

Anyway, these magi hear that the messiah, that the people of Abraham have long been waiting for, a new king born in the line of David, has been born. They do what students of the stars do and use them for navigation. They fix on a star that they know sits somewhere above the Jerusalem region where this king is to be born.

With a benevolent spirit—that more people need to have in our own day and age—they go out of their way to celebrate another people's good news. The magi come to Jerusalem to ask for help in precisely finding the town where the descendant of David is to be born.

And then, *the passage turns cold*.

King Herod hears of what the magi are seeking, and it terrifies him. For him, this news of a messiah is like hearing that a meteor is headed straight toward his world; a world where the benefits of power and wealth flow his way.

So, he summons scribes and priests to consult scripture to determine the town where it is said the Son of David will be born. The general revelation of stars can reveal only so much. It takes the special revelation of scripture to guide them to Bethlehem.

This is where I will stop with this story. I want to stop here in the story because the focus of my sermon—my last lesson to Confirmands, is on reading scripture. Notice what the king hopes to gain from scripture, and what the magi hope to gain. The magi seek a child to worship. The king is seeking a threat to be eliminated. The one embraces a future. The other defies it. One reading warm. The other reading cold.

This is as good a time as any to raise up two principles of reading scripture that Presbyterians have stressed since their beginning.

The first principle is this: **Faith finds faith in scripture.**

King Herod proves that scripture can be read with self-serving intent and that bad faith readings can lead to bad faith results. Read the Bible cold and it can be what you want it to be. It can be read in all kinds of ways that does not lead to the Good news as passages are cherry picked and manipulated to say what the reader wants the Bible to say.

- Read the Bible in a sexist way and it can be a celebration of male domination,
- Read it in a nationalistic way and it can be a celebration of nation... *my* nation,
- Read it in an ideological way and it can be the celebration of one political party or cause.



- Read it in an individual way, and it can be your guide to self-absorption or gratification..., or a resource for why God—why Jesus shares one’s conservative or progressive views.
- Read from a place of cultural arrogance, and it can be a silly record of a people too ignorant to understand what it means to be modern, or what it means to be woke, or what it means to be a capitalist in a democracy.
- Read it from a place of atheism, and it can be read as a library of contradictions and even proof that God is cruel, or God does not exist.
- Read it from a place of science or history, and it can be read as a textbook that needs to be tossed aside.

But, the Bible,

- full of contradictions,
- reflecting different times and cultures,
- ignorant of modern science and not aware how we moderns have it all figured out,

can be read differently. It can be read warmly as a witness to a good and loving God who not only created all that is, but also cares about us... a God who demands justice and shows mercy, a God who condemns sin and forgives sinners, a God who requires repentance but for the purpose of reconciliation, a God who will be a Messiah and lead us through this journey of life.

To go back to the first principle, faith finds faith in the Bible. Put another way, it is love for God that finds God’s love in scripture. Faith doesn’t begin in words read; it begins in life experienced. God’s love, justice, judgement, compassion, and mercy are always experienced before it is understood. Scripture is a witness—a help—as “faith seeks understanding.”²

But now we have another problem. To read scripture and find warmth means prioritizing some passages over others. That leads me to the second principle of reading scripture: **Let scripture interpret scripture.**

The only way to do that is to let the relationship we have with God in Christ be the lens by which we read. That means we should begin precisely where King Herod began, only with a different heart. Begin with the passages that will help you find Jesus. Begin by fixating on the North Star that is Jesus.

Let me put it this way. Imagine all of scripture being a mass of stars in the night sky. We need to be as sea-faring adventurers once were who identified signature stars to help them make sense of the night sky and chart the way to where they wanted to go. Find first the passages that speak to the central and primary good news that God so loved the world that he lived upon it. Begin there. Begin with the passages that bear the bright, shining light, that God’s unconditional love lives among us.

Then, from there, find the constellation of passages that help bring sense and order to the sky and allow you to navigate your life.

² St. Augustine



- Jesus teaching that the greatest Command is to love God and love neighbor,
- Jesus teaching about God’s unconditional love by telling the story of the prodigal son,
- Jesus demonstrating what love of neighbor means by
 - welcoming the outcast,
 - dining with the sinner,
 - healing the sick,
 - and forgiving those who betray him;
- Paul reflecting on Jesus’s death and resurrection by declaring that nothing can separate us from God’s love,
 - and then on a separate occasion declaring that the differences of race, gender, and social standing we sometimes think are so significant make no difference when it comes to God’s love;
- And Revelation’s vision that in the new Jerusalem, the final kingdom where God’s reign is clear, there is no crying, or pain, or sorrow anymore.

With those stars to guide you, you’ll better make sense of the Old Testament and know which passages should be your primary guide.

I’ll suggest a few of them:

- the beginning of Genesis where God created everything—including us—and declared it all to be good;
- the passage in Exodus when God said to slaves, “you do not belong to Pharaoh, you belong to me. I will be your God and you will be my people;
- in Deuteronomy, the constellation of the Ten Commandments, and then the shining star of the command to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength,
- in the prophesy of Micah, with his declaration that empty rituals mean nothing to God, but justice flowing in the community means everything;
- in the prophesy of Isaiah, with his comfort of exiles who think that their life with God is behind them, telling them that their best life with God is ahead;
- in the book of Proverbs when it says the beginning of wisdom is in a particular kind of humility, which it describes as the fear of God, but which can be thought of as a respect for Truth;
- in the book of Job when it tells us that having God near is far more important than having answers to questions that cannot be answered, such as why children sometimes die for no reason.

Yes, there are many stars in the scriptural sky with many passages to pick and choose from to say anything one wants scripture to say. But if, somehow,

- your heart has found a way to selflessly love others in ways that you have been selflessly loved—



- if you have found joy and delight in not thinking yourself a god but in knowing that you belong to God,
- if you have learned that reconciliation with others is the art of life, and reconciliation with God is at life's end,

then you bring something with you when you look at the biblical sky. Your God-given bias for justice, love, and grace will help you find the guiding lights that will help you hear the Good News of the Bible for the Jews... for Christians... for magi... for all the world.

