

What Made Them Wise?

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Bible Reading

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
And thick darkness the peoples;

But the Lord will arise upon you,
And his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
They all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
And your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

Then 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.

A 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.

(Isaiah 60:1-6)

Reading from Swedenborg

In regard to natural light and spiritual light the case is this: natural light is from the sun of the world, and spiritual light is from the sun of heaven, which is the Lord. All the truths of faith that we learn from Infancy are apprehended by means of such objects and derivative ideas as are from the light of the world, thus all and each are apprehended naturally, for all the ideas of our thought, so long as we live in the world, are founded upon such things as are in the world; and therefore if these were taken away, our thought would utterly perish. The person who has not been regenerated is wholly ignorant that there is spiritual light, or even that there is in heaven a light that has nothing in common with the light of the world, still less does he know that it is this light that enlightens the ideas and objects which are from the light of the world, and enables one to think, infer, and reflect. That spiritual light can do this is because this light is the wisdom itself that proceeds from the Lord, and this is presented as light before the sight of the angels in heaven. From this light appear all and each of the things that are below, or that are in humans from natural light; but not the converse, unless the person has been regenerated, in which case the things of heaven, that is, of good and truth, by enlightenment from spiritual light appear in the natural as in a representative mirror. From this it is evident that the Lord, who is light itself, sees all things and each that are in the thought and will of a person, nay, that are in universal nature, and that nothing whatever is hidden from Him. (Arcana Coelestia #5477)

Sermon

Good morning, everyone! I hope that each of you is having a meaningful and joyous Christmas season. I say this because I would be remiss in my minister's duties if I did not remind you that the season is not over yet! This morning we observe Epiphany Sunday, which marks the last week of Christmas. This is an important day, for it provides us with an opportunity to reflect upon the significance of the two groups of visitors to the holy family, the shepherds and the wise men.

In the biblical narrative, we learn of the shepherds in Luke, and of the wise men in Matthew. Luke explains in great detail how the shepherds learned of the birth: An angel suddenly appeared and told them the news. With this proclamation the skies were filled with angels, all singing away at the top of their voices. The shepherds were quite understandably frightened by this sight! But once the angels left and the night's silence returned, they decided to make the short journey down the hill. And sure enough, they found the family with their new son, just as the angels had said.

In Matthew we learn of the second group--the wise men. What do we know of them? Really very little. Matthew explains that there were some men who studied the stars, who came from the East to Jerusalem and asked King Herod, ""Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the East, and we have come to worship him"" (Matthew 2:2).

This inquiry set off a series of events. Herod conferred with his chief priests and learned of the ancient prophecy that a leader would be born in Bethlehem. Next Herod held a secret meeting with the wise men and instructed them to go find the child and return to Herod, so that he too might go and worship the child. The wise men proceeded to Bethlehem, guided by the star. They found the child, and offered him gifts. Then in a dream they were warned not to return to Herod, so they left by a different way.

From this account we really know very little about the wise men--we learn much more about Herod. We don't know where these visitors were from or even how many there were! In fact, we don't even know when they arrived in Bethlehem!

There are various theories that attempt to answer these questions. Regarding where they were from, there are three major theories. One is that they came from China; a second, from India; and a third, from Babylonia. All of these were centers of astrology. But without going into a lot of detail, let me just say that it makes the most sense to assume they came from Babylonia, where many Israelites had lived in exile. Second to Israel, Babylonia had more Jewish synagogues than anywhere else in the world. These would have housed scholars who were aware of the ancient prophecies.

Their number is pure speculation. Theories range from the traditional three, to as many as twenty-four. St. Augustine was the first to propose a number, and he settled on twelve. Martin Luther was among those advocating that there were three. But again, nowhere is there an accurate record of the number.

As for when they arrived in Bethlehem, most theories agree on one key point: In the year 6 BC, over a three-month period the star Sirius aligned itself in a spectacular configuration with Mars and Jupiter. From this we can assume that the wise men saw it, and after studying what it meant, set off on their journey. Each night it confirmed that they were heading in the right direction. And finally, its fading radiance was seen over Bethlehem. These sightings spanned a three-month period, which is just about the length of time it would have taken to study it and travel from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

But who were these individuals? Matthew has already told us they were men who studied the stars. Please understand that this does not mean they were astrologers or astronomers in today's sense of the word. They did not believe that the stars controlled our destiny, nor were they aware of planetary orbits or comets or any other heavenly bodies. In Biblical times, astrologers were people who believed that the

stars were signs or reflections of special events on earth. These people studied the stars in a quest for knowledge. Wisdom was achieved through being aware of these events.

Thus, when the wise men observed the appearance of the unusual star pattern, it set off a study as to what the configuration meant. Thus, when they noticed Sirius, they knew that its name meant ""birth of a prince."" Their consultations with learned people, among whom would have been Jewish rabbis, revealed that a special birth had been foretold. But where?

The most obvious place for the birth of a prince was Jerusalem, where there was a royal palace. It was not until they arrived that they realized the heavenly signs might be pointing to a different destination, and foretelling the birth of a different kind of king. And it is this point that brings us to the true significance of the wise men and their journey to Bethlehem.

While preparing this sermon, I have been struck once again by the significance of light as a spiritual guide. I speak of that sense of what illuminates our minds, of what provides us with an awareness of goodness and truth, of that feeling that assures us that our lives are headed in the right direction, and that we are guided by God's presence. In the accounts of our Lord's birth, and even before that in the beautiful imagery from Isaiah, we have the assurance that the light is with us, shining anew upon those who will but seek it.

Thus, the wise men serve as a reminder of trust in God's presence with us. But there is also a second level of meaning to this story, and it involves our reaction to that light, for in the accounts of the shepherds and wise men, we see two very different reactions.

For the shepherds, the light filled their beings with fear, and it was not until the darkness returned that they were able to move. Aren't we all like that at times--afraid of what we really need to do? In such times, it is fear that is the power behind growth. Fear sometimes does enable us, just like the shepherds, to make those short journeys of life, and these can lead us to the manger. In these brief encounters we can grow, but not by much. The shepherds' journey went by quickly. Fear only enables us to take the small steps that are relatively easy.

The wise men, on the other hand, made the long difficult journey. Their quest had a depth and breadth that brought deeper rewards. They were not afraid of the darkness, for the light served them as a guide. In terms of our spiritual growth, we are like these visitors when we show a willingness to endure for the long haul, when we accept the fact that life is not always easy, that short cuts are not always worthwhile. We possess a bit of their wisdom when we develop a mental and spiritual temperament of patient understanding that allows God to guide us as slowly and gently as a shining star.

One of history's greatest preachers once made this point better than I could ever make it. In speaking on the difference between the shepherds and wise men, Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "In these visitors two basic human characteristics are portrayed. In the shepherds we see fear in motion, and in fact, we are all at times compelled to act in response to fear. But it offers us no enduring benefit. For strength that endures we must seek to be like the wise men, guided in the dark times of life by the light of love in motion. This is the key characteristic to a successful spiritual journey."

What made the wise men wise? It was their ability to see the light and trust in its guidance. With this ability they were able to set God's love into motion. Our task is to do the same--to use our journey of life as an opportunity to set God's love into motion in countless ways. When we do, life brings us to many destinations, each one enabling us to grow in wisdom.

As we stand here today at the start of a new year, let us remember this lesson. Let us be guided by the light, and let us travel where it leads. Amen.

Prayer

O Light Giver of the World, shine your light into the dark corners of our hearts and minds so that we may see again. We have been blinded by our own sense of importance so that everything is out of focus and unclear. May we so walk in your light that wisdom and love become blended together in our new lives. Amen.