

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 1, 2017**

Rev. Andrew Reid

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

“Kings to the brightness of your dawn”

Sometimes the way to read and interpret Scripture is to look at it from a high level, looking not at individual words, phrases and verses, but at the big picture that emerges when you take it as a whole.

And sometimes it is fun to take a couple of verses from Scripture and examine them in detail, word by word, phrase by phrase, verse by verse. That's what I want to spend a few minutes doing this morning, with Matthew 2:1-2: *... wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.'*

... wise men ... Not kings, despite what the carol calls them. And also an unspecified number, again despite what the carol and today's anthem say. Some ancient eastern traditions say that there were actually twelve of them, one for each of the tribes of Israel. Other traditions in the west say that there were only three and that their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. If they were not kings, then they were certainly wealthy, wealthy enough to devote time and money to their quest. Recent scholars say that they were Magi, which would make them practitioners of mystical, magical arts. In a very real sense, they represent the best of human scholarship and learning at their time.

... wise men from the East ... From Persian lands afar, according to this morning's anthem. No-one can say for sure where they were from, but the usual guesses include Persia, Babylon and Arabia, all recognized centres of the scholarship and learning of the then known world. Wherever their home was, it was a long way away.

... *wise men from the East came to Jerusalem* ... Given what they thought was the goal of their quest, Jerusalem was the logical place to go.

... *wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'* ... Which is what made Jerusalem the logical place for them to go. Of course, we know, with the benefit of 2000 years of familiarity with the Epiphany story, that they were in the wrong place. But – *the child who has been born king of the Jews*: where else would a birth like that take place but in the capital city of the Jews, the city that lay and still lies at the heart of the kingdom of the Jews, the faith of the Jews, the identity of the Jews?

... *For we observed his star at its rising* ... One of the characteristics of the magical arts which the Magi practiced was astrology, the art of searching the skies for unusual celestial activity and finding meaning in it. Attempts have been made to research historical astronomical events that might explain the star – a supernova, perhaps, or some sort of planetary alignment, or even, since the Magi said it moved ahead of them, a comet. Again, none of these attempts have been conclusive, and it remains a mystery.

... *For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.* Wise men, representing the best of human scholarship and learning; Magi, representing a religion that was very different from the faith of Israel; travellers from a far-off land, representing the entire non-Jewish world; seekers after religious truth, representing the spiritual search that has been part of the human psyche since the beginning of time: coming to pay homage to the One whom we know to be the Christ-child, the Word made flesh, God in human form. And by offering gold for a king, incense for the divine, and myrrh to prepare for death, recognizing the uniqueness of this Child.

All very well and good, and hopefully somewhere close to the truth that lies behind the story of the wise men. But there is another way to read

and interpret Scripture. This way doesn't look at the big picture that emerges when you take it as a whole. And it doesn't examine Scripture word by word, phrase by phrase, verse by verse.

This way listens to the language used in Scripture, as it seeks and speaks the truth with a voice other than the voice of rigorous theology or of pure linguistic analysis. It's the way that listens for the poetry in the language. I sometimes feel that there is far more poetry in Scripture than we realise. It's only our cerebral, intellectual, Presbyterian approach that keeps us from hearing it.

And so I invite you to listen for the poetry in the words of the poet-prophet Isaiah:

- ¹ Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*
- ² 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.*
- ³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*
- ⁴ 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.*
- ⁵ 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.*
- ⁶ 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*