

January 6, 2019 – Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

What is civilization? That's a question that humanity has been wrestling with for a very long time. What is civilization? What is the goal of civilized society?

Most people would say things like freedom, or education, or scientific progress, or a universal fulfillment of basic human needs like food and clothing and medicine and clean water. These represent civilization. These represent what human beings should be striving towards.

Why are those things considered to be of such greater good? Well, we can thank a time period known as the Enlightenment for that. The Enlightenment was a cultural transformation that occurred in Europe around the 17th and 18th centuries. The United States was basically founded on Enlightenment ideals. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: that's basically the Enlightenment in a nutshell.

The Enlightenment is also the reason why we often refer to the period prior to it as the Dark Ages. To the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the world was covered in darkness, and then suddenly we were enlightened by liberty and education and science.

That's all well and good. I like liberty and education and science too. But should these things be the highest ideals of our society? That's quite another question.

I think we take that for granted when we're reading the Bible. So often we assume that ancient Israel had the same priorities as us. Enlightenment priorities.

And so we hear about barbarian Philistines or pagan Egyptians or the Greeks and Romans with all their immorality. And we think, "Ugh, they were such savages. I'm so glad God's people were there to shine the light of civilization."

But that's not actually the case. The Philistines were incredible sailors, responsible for most of the economic development of the Mediterranean. The Egyptians taught us virtually everything we know about mathematics and engineering. And the Greeks and Romans were the pinnacle of democracy and education for hundreds of years.

So when you read the Old Testament and you read about the Israelites looking down on their neighbors, just know that the rest of the world was looking down on Israel. To everybody else, the Israelites were a bunch of backwards, uncivilized, hillbillies. Who for some reason wouldn't eat shrimp or bacon. And liked to do some pretty weird things to their boys 8 days after they were born.

There was nothing enlightened about Israel or the Jews in the world's eyes. To the unbelieving world, God's people were the ones sitting in darkness. And everybody else had the light of liberty and education and science to guide them.

Which is important to remember when we read about the wise men in our Gospel lesson today. At least, that's what our ESV Bibles call them. It's not actually their title, but it is a good description.

More specifically, they were called magi. And this is not the first time we've encountered magi in the Bible. We meet magi in the Old Testament too. They are named Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

They too were magi. And it's from these four Israelites that we learn a lot about what being a magi means. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were all young men taken into exile in Babylon with the rest of the nation.

But because they were Israelite royalty and had a certain amount of education already, they were chosen to become magi. Men who would be raised in the palace with every luxury and advantage. To one day become advisors to the king. Possibly even rulers over a province.

Becoming a magi was like being given a scholarship to Harvard. And so it's fairly accurate to call them "wise men." They were the wisest, most educated men of the nation. Men that even kings would go to for advice.

These magi in our Gospel lesson, these wise men, are probably from Babylon or Persia, areas that were already centers of education and science and culture. And they see a star in the night sky. Now, back then, being an astronomer and being an astrologer were pretty much the same thing. If you studied the stars, then you expected to find meaning and messages in them.

And they see a big message in these stars. A new king has been born in Judea. Now, so far, this story makes a lot of sense. There were magi in Babylon and Persia during this time period. They did study the stars. And a new king had been born in Judea.

But then, things get unusual. These magi decide to go visit this king. Even though it's a journey of 500 to 1000 miles. Even though it will take weeks, maybe months to complete it. Even though it means traveling through lands filled with robbers and bandits. They go.

When they get to Judea, of course, they go straight to Jerusalem, the capital. If there's a king who's been born, he will be in the palace they assume. But there's no infant king there. Just a very confused Herod. And chief priests telling them about Micah's very old, very forgotten prophecy of a king born in Bethlehem.

But once again, things get a little odd. This doesn't stop them. This doesn't cause any doubt within them. They go straight to Bethlehem.

And, when they get there, they find a peasant couple and their very ordinary son. Living in poverty. Nothing at all to mark them as royalty. Except this star in the sky. And yet they hand over gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Gifts worth thousands in today's money.

And then, to top it all off, they bow down and worship him. They have their own king. They have their own gods. And yet, they bow down to this very ordinary child.

These magi give up time and comfort and money. They risk their lives. They abandon their king and their gods. And for what? Well... for the light of the world.

You see these men realized something that so many who came before them did not and so many who came after them would not. I don't know how they realized it. Whether it was purely through the working of the Holy Spirit or the study of Old Testament scriptures or how God led them to it. But somehow, somehow, they realized something important.

They realized that there's more to enlightenment than liberty. There's more to enlightenment than education. There's more to enlightenment than science or democracy or civilization itself. There's more to enlightenment than any work of man. Because true enlightenment comes from God's Son, the light of the world.

Isaiah had it right. *"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."* The world is covered in thick darkness. The world has been covered in thick darkness for as long as there has been sin on this planet.

And this thick darkness of sin blinds us to the truth. The truth that there is a God. A creator. Who made every bit of this. Who made us, our very body and soul.

The truth that this God hates evil. That he has set a standard for us to obey. That he has laws. And that there is no light or life in anything apart from his law.

The truth that this God also loves us. Despite our disobedience. Despite our blind pursuit of sin. He loves us. He forgives us. And he will always welcome us back with open arms.

We were blind to this truth. Blinded by thick darkness. But then our light came into the world. And as Isaiah foretold, that light drew many to the wisdom of our Lord.

It drew kings from far off nations. It drew the poor and sick and crippled and demon possessed. It drew Samaritans and Roman centurions and Canaanite women. It drew just about everybody except the people who should have seen that light first.

No, those people, the Pharisees and the chief priests and the teachers of the Law, they tried to snuff out that light. They tried to crucify him on a cross. But it didn't work. Because as the Apostle John told us on Christmas morning, you can't put out God's light.

You can't keep God from shining upon his people. You can't stop him from reaching out to every corner of the earth. And bringing in all those Philistines and Egyptians and Romans and Babylonians and Persians and you and me into the enlightenment of his grace.

There is still a very thick darkness over this world. But, as Isaiah tells us, our light has come. And so we too arise and shine. Shine into the dark ages of this world. That more men and women who think themselves wise may see the light of God's love. And be drawn to know him through us. Amen.