

There are many reasons why I prefer mid-Missouri to northern Michigan. Especially at this time of year. The town where we used to live currently has a temperature of about 12°, a windchill of -3°, and 6” of snow on the ground, with another 1-3” falling tomorrow. Winter in northern Michigan is brutal.

But it does have it's perks. And one of those is the northern lights. My wife and I were privileged to see a clear, bright, aurora borealis on two different occasions. It flowed in green ribbons of light across the winter sky. Pulsating and shifting in a way that seemed strangely unnatural, even though it was the most natural thing in the world. It was an awe inspiring display.

The northern lights have earned their reputation. And they, along with plenty of other astronomical phenomenon have long held the fascination of humanity. I don't think it's coincidence that pretty much every civilization in history has called outer space “the heavens.” Because looking up into the sky makes you feel like you're staring into something totally beyond your comprehension. Something immense and infinite and eternal. Something divine. Something heavenly.

I once read a theologian who said that the main thing that sets human beings apart from animals is who we look to for answers. Animals look to man for answers. When your dog or cat needs something, they come to you to solve their problem. But man is different. Man looks to God for answers. Except that, in our sinfulness, mankind doesn't have a clue where to look for God.

And so he just looks... up. He looks at the only thing that seems infinite and divine. And looks for answers there. And that's exactly what the Magi in our Gospel lesson were doing. They were looking to the stars for answers.

And it's easy for us as Christians to criticize them for practicing astrology. I mean, if one of our members came to me and started talking about their horoscope or their star sign or some other such nonsense, I would have some harsh words for them. Astrology has no place in a Christian's life.

But these men weren't Christians. They weren't even Jews. The Bible doesn't say where they were from. But chances are it was Persia or Babylon. So they're quite clearly pagans and Gentiles. They don't know scripture or God's law.

And really, it's probably not even fair to call them astrologers. Yes, they were practicing astrology. But these are Magi. Wise men. They're closer to what we would consider an academic. They study everything. From the grass of the field to the stars of the sky. And there's nothing wrong with that. The prophet Daniel in the Old Testament was a Magi.

They want to know everything there is to know. To see everything there is to see. But unlike many modern day academics, they recognized something important: there are things out there that they can't know. There are things that they can't see. They may be pagans and gentiles, but they still understand the proverb, “Only a fool says there is no god.”

And so in addition to learning everything they can about the natural world, they also try to learn everything they can about the supernatural world. And that leads them to the same place it led countless men before and after them. It leads them to stare at the sky. And hope that God will give them an answer.

Usually, God doesn't. Usually, God has little-to-no respect for those who seek him in stars and planets. But on this particular occasion, he decides to do something different. On this particular occasion, he decides to do something surprising. He gives them their answer. He gives them a message, in fact. A message that says, “Go to Judea. A great king has been born there.”

What did this message look like? I haven't a clue. But it must have been pretty clear to them. For a group of men from the east, see a star in the east, and promptly... go west. Go figure. Why did God decide on this particular night to use a pagan religion to communicate the greatest prophecy ever revealed to mankind? I don't know that either.

But, then again, the Christmas story is full of broken rules. God becomes man. A virgin becomes pregnant. A king is born in a stable. None of it is logical. None of it makes much sense. About the only thing that does make sense in the whole story is the reaction of people to the news.

The shepherds, who hear the angel's message and run to see this thing that has happened that the Lord told them about. And then tell everyone they meet about the good news. Elizabeth and John the Baptist, who leap for joy that the mother of their Lord should come to them.

And now, the Magi. A group of men who have never heard a word of scripture until they hear it from Herod and the chief priests. A group of men who have no idea where they are going or what they're going to find when they get there. A group of men who don't even know the God that they are visiting. And yet, nonetheless, know exactly how to worship him.

The old Christmas carol, *We Three Kings*, actually gets this part right. Gold they bring to crown him as king forever. Frankincense, to proclaim that the deity of God most high lies before them. And myrrh, a bitter perfume. Something you only smell when there is sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, and dying. Because it's what you put in a tomb.

Three gifts of incredible value. But also three perfect gifts for the Son of God made flesh. Dwelling among us for our salvation. So perfect, that there's no way they could have come up with them on their own. Only by the Spirit of God would they have possibly have arrived at those three, prophetic treasures to lay before the Christ child.

Which is really the point of this story. Despite what it may look like, this is not simply the story of wise men seeking the King of the Jews. No, it's the story of God coming to the wise of this world and revealing something to them that their own wisdom never could have revealed. It's the story of God coming to pagans and astrologers and foreigners and saying, "Yes, you too. All of you. You're all invited to worship my Son."

It's the story of God coming to shepherds and prophets and Magi and all of humanity and showing us exactly what we've been looking for all along. So that we don't just aimlessly look at the stars and say, "Where are you God? I need answers." But, instead, we behold the child, just as they did. Behold God incarnate.

And find every answer we could ever need. Not in words. Not in philosophies. Not in signs or wonders or even miracles. But in action. Animals look to man. Man looks to God. And God says, "Look at my Son. Look at him as he is born for you. Look at him as he dies for you. Look at him as he rises for you. Look at him as he ascends into the heavens. Look for him to return in the same way he left you."

You see, as Christians, there's nothing wrong with looking into the sky for answers. Because that's exactly where we're going to find our answers. Our answer for sin. Our answer for pain. Our answer for death. The answer to all of it will come descending on the clouds in glory, to judge both the living and the dead.

And so the Christmas story is not just the story of Mary and Joseph. Of angels and shepherds. Of wise men and their gifts. It's also your story and my story. It's the story of God reaching out to sinners in love. And showing us wisdom from the heavens. With all answers we will ever need. Amen.