



# Heavenly Appearing

Psalm 29; Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

So what is the big deal about Jesus' birth? What difference does God's coming to earth make in my daily life? We still have jobs to work, courses of study, homes to maintain, children to raise, clothing to wash, toys to put away, bills to pay, and meals to prepare and serve. Does a birth two thousand years ago really make a difference in how I live, the choices I make, and the routines of my existence? What impact should it have?

Epiphany celebrates the appearing of God in Christ Jesus. We find something of the kind in the recognition of the magi in following a star that was to have appeared in the sky to mark Jesus' coming. To the ancient eastern mind stars and gods were linked. Babylonian and Egyptian astrology both determined that stars were the visible manifestation of the gods who ruled from the heavens. With the coming of the magi to find Jesus, they proclaim divine guidance in locating the child born with a special purpose. They astounded all of Jerusalem with the words that a child had been born with the express purpose of being their king. It seems strange that foreign, pagan astrologers would be the ones to announce such news!

The stars were deemed to be more than physical structures in the universe. They were not understood as giant balls of hot gas. To the ancients, stars were the visible aspect of gods living in the heavens. Psalm 29 mentions this understanding of the structure of the world as it speaks of the flood of waters under the control of *Yahweh*, as well as the "sons of gods" worshipping in splendor. *Yahweh*, the great God over all creation, worthy of the worship of the very stars worshipped by so many peoples, is the One revealed in Jesus Christ. The One who sends rain, fire, and wind, who is enthroned above what is known of the universe is revealed for all to see.

This appearing of God is not intended for the select few. God saw fit to declare through what we would consider inappropriate means the revealing of God in Christ Jesus to astrologers from a foreign land like Babylon. Gentiles announce the wonder of Messiah's birth! Herod and the rest of Jerusalem are disturbed by their arrival and proclamation. As it seems, they bear news the chosen nation has not received. God has sent Messiah, yet it has been made known to astrologers, rather than to the prophets of the chosen nation. Indeed others had been told the news, but that God would declare this heavenly appearing to the Gentiles was most unsettling. The Jews were not open to God's plan to reveal grace to all. Are we any more willing for God's grace for the world to flow through us?

The more common criticism of my teaching in Brazil had to do with the people I chose to teach. I enjoyed teaching seminary students, but more so I enjoyed teaching non-seminarian church members in the extension program. The concern often expressed was that my time was wasted on people who had not accepted a full-time call to ministry. On the other hand, concern was that only those with a verified call to ministry should be allowed a theological education. Jesus did not exclude people from access to God's revelation. He did challenge his hearers to apply revelation's meaning to their lives. Are we in touch with our responsibility to share the fullness of God's revelation as a gift for all?

The center of history was turning on Judah, yet the people were unaware. Isaiah had spoken of kings and peoples converging upon the light of God's presence shed among the people. It is this appearing of God in Christ that was being inaugurated in the birth of Messiah. This was the message the

magi announced in seeking the child born as king. Yet there was more in Isaiah's words than the magi or people understood. Indeed, Jesus was born to be king, yet he was also the very presence of *Yahweh* among the people, visible in flesh and blood for all to see.

Visible and present as God was in Christ Jesus, many did not see. Most did not understand or rejoice in his birth, life, of ministry. While magi came from the East to worship, those who declared themselves expecting Messiah did not heed or recognize his coming. They could not see how God's presence impacted their lives apart from issues of national sovereignty and economics. Messiah was for the chosen people of God, not to be shared by the Gentiles. Messiah was for their benefit as a nation. They could not see how Messiah's coming could be precious to the nations beyond their own borders. Are we willing to share the message of salvation as precious to all the world?

We send money to Global Missions to demonstrate our acceptance that the gospel is for all the world. We send missionaries to work among the world's most neglected people, sharing the love and grace of Christ Jesus. What about the neglected in our own community? What about our own neighbors whose ways are different from our own? What about the people around us who are deemed unworthy of our association? What about those whose presence makes us uncomfortable? Are we open to God using us to touch their lives with the grace offered in Christ Jesus?

Paul's words remind us that the mystery now revealed in Christ was true throughout the ages, though it was not plain until Christ's appearing. The Gentiles were offered grace in Christ's appearing to be fellow heirs of the promise. This is the message Paul served as ambassador. It hardly seems like much of a revelation to our way of thinking. It is just "so what" statement our ears. To Paul this was extraordinary news. Its most noteworthy aspect, perhaps, was the fact that it had always been true. God had always desired to rescue all nations into fellowship. We were the ones who did not recognize or accept God's call to reconciliation.

Paul lived with an awareness that the world needed to hear this news. The world often turned a deaf ear at the beginning. After all, this gospel is a strange message of a loving god who actually desires fellowship with sinful, unworthy humanity. Do I live as though the world needs and wants to find God?

We gather today to celebrate the presence of Christ Jesus. We recognize his presence and appearing as we take the elements of our service of communion. We remember the dirty, smelly shepherds who came to marvel at his birth. We recall the pagan, foreign magi who traveled far to worship the king born for all the world to celebrate. We wonder at his years of growth in Nazareth and the signs and teaching throughout Jesus' years of ministry. We marvel at the offer of grace to people like us, unworthy, foreign, imperfect, and sinful. It was for those of us who had nothing of consequence to offer God that Jesus appeared to reveal God's love and gift of salvation, taking this declaration of grace and love to the cross on our behalf.

What will keep us from proclaiming the wonder of the appearing of Christ Jesus? Are we too worried over distorted images of Christianity to proclaim Christ? Are we too uncomfortable with the idea that those who make us uncomfortable are loved by God? Are we unready to accept that the world needs the message revealed in Christ Jesus? If our lives do not proclaim the grace of God revealed in Christ, we have not yet begun to worship with the magi, presenting our all to serve his gospel.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*