



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

First Sunday after Christmas

December 29, 2019

“Stars, Dreams and Angels”

(Matthew 2:13)

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“Now when the [wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him’ (Mt. 2:13).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone....sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever noticed that in the nativity accounts, God uses all kinds of means to inform people about Jesus? For instance, the magi saw things in the stars. Joseph had his dreams. Mary and the shepherds were visited by angels. God used stars, dreams, and angels to communicate with various people during this time. Doesn't that strike you as odd?

We confess "Scripture alone". Scripture alone determines our faith and practice. God wants to lead us by Scripture. God wants us to put our trust in Scripture, not in dreams. That makes good sense, right, because my dreams are pretty weird and are usually forgotten moments after waking up, and are impossible to interpret, at least with any degree of certainty.

Moreover, you can't read, mark, learn and inwardly digest (or assimilate) a dream, but you can do that with God's Word. You can't cross reference a dream. But you can do that with his Word, to see how God says the same thing in a different way elsewhere in Scripture. You can't consult the early church fathers to see how they would interpret your dream. Luther's Works will be of no help to you either. But all these resources and many more are available to us to gain a fuller understanding of his Word.

Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed (inspired) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). I don't believe I've had even one dream that would be useful for preaching and teaching, and some would get me defrocked. Yet God used dreams repeatedly in the nativity narrative. Doesn't that strike you as odd?

He also used the stars to somehow inform the magi of his birth. That too is surprising, because Scripture has nothing good to say about astrology. Astrology has its roots in the occult practice of fortune telling. God repeatedly says he detests all forms of fortune telling. I think I know why. An astrologist will never tell you, "I don't know. Why don't you see Scripture about that?" God wants to lead us by his word, not by astrology. Don't even

use these things for entertainment: horoscopes, palm readers, oiji boards, fortune tellers, and the like.

Leviticus 19 says, “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.” Did you notice the jealousy there? He’s the one who created and redeemed you. You don’t need that trash. He’s your God. And Ecclesiastes 7 says, “When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future” (v. 14). God doesn’t mince words when it comes to these things. Deuteronomy 18, “Let no one be found among you who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord” (vv. 10-12).

And yet, God used the stars or at least a star to inform the magi of the Lord’s birth.

And what of the angels? The very word angel means “messenger”. God frequently used angels to announce important events in the history of salvation: the birth of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and the ascension of Jesus. But he doesn’t want us waiting to hear from an angel before believing something or doing something. It’s enough if it’s written in Scripture. Remember what Paul wrote, “Even if an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse” (Gal. 1:8). For day in and day out Christian living, we don’t need to hear from the angels. He has already given us his Word. Similarly, we don’t need signs after the funeral to assure us our loved one is safe. He’s already given that assurance in his Word.

In all my years, I have yet to see even one angel. But starting even as a very young child, I was taught the word, and then VBS and Sunday School with all those wonderful flannel graph bible stories. Paul wrote to Timothy, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). In all my life I have yet to receive even one message from an angel, but if I wanted to I could marinate in God’s Holy Word.

So why then did God choose to use stars, dreams and angels to announce the birth?

First, these were revelations to specific people who would play specific roles in a very important part of salvation history. You and I are important to God, are probably not playing a pivotal role in salvation history, not like Mary and Joseph, the magi and the shepherds. God wanted to get specific information to specific people for whom he had specific plans. It would not have been very practical or appropriate to bury somewhere in Scripture the command to Joseph to get up and flee with his family to Egypt. A dream served that purpose well. But for the rest of us living day to day Christian lives, his Word is sufficient.

The problem with miracles or miraculous revelations is that once you've had one, you want another. I'm thinking of the children of Israel in the desert. Again and again, God used miracles to help his people (the ten plagues, the pillars of cloud by day and fire by night, the dividing of the Red Sea, manna and quail, the voice from a quaking Mt. Sinai . . .) All these miracles, but it was never enough. At Massah and Meribah, when they became thirsty, they couldn't help but wonder if God had abandoned them. "Are you with us or not?" they asked. "If you are with us, why are we thirsty? Do something." Again, the problem with miracles or miraculous revelations is that once you've had one, you want another, and then another one after that . . . and may find it difficult to understand if the next one doesn't come along.

Miraculous revelations are very rare. I don't want to say God can't use them because he surely has. But I do want to say we have everything we need in Scripture. We don't need anything more than what Scripture has already given. And if you ever receive a message contrary to Scripture, you know its origins are not of God, for God does not contradict himself. In Luther's era some were running around claiming to have had a special revelation of the Holy Spirit, and Luther responded by saying, "I don't care if they swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all" if it's contrary to Scripture, let them be accursed.

We are bound to Scripture. But God is not bound. He can break the rules if he wants. Think of it this way: there is an ordinary, predictable way for the making of wine that happens

all the time. God's extraordinary way happened just once at Cana in Galilee, where he turned water immediately into wine. He broke the usual rules that day. He gets to do that.

God's ordinary way to lead us in faith and life is through his word. He promises to work through his Word. He desires that we trust the Word more than our own reason and senses, more than our own feelings. If he wants to, however, God can break the rules and use extraordinary means of dreams, stars and angels. God gets to do that, but he never promises to do that with us. He promises to use his Word.

And think of it. Even with these extraordinary means, the Word is always there. When the angel Gabriel visited Mary, was Gabriel passing along just his own words, his own plan. He was sharing God's plan for Mary and conveying it with God's own word. Similarly when the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, it was the Lord's plan for Joseph, the Lord's message, the Lord's word.

What about the star? The magi saw in the stars the message that there was one born king of the Jews. Reason tells them that Jerusalem is the capital city so it would make sense to begin their search for the new born king in Jerusalem. Off to the holy city they go with their treasures in tow. They make their way to Herod's palace because that's the rational place to start, and they ask, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod consults his court theologians, and they know from God's Word where the Christ was to be born—in Bethlehem of Judea of course. It's right there in Micah 5 for all to see. Herod's theologians know the prophecy of Micah, and it's this Word of God that provides the necessary course correction for the Magi. Human reason led them astray to Herod's palace in Jerusalem. Without God's Word, the magi would never have looked for Jesus in little Bethlehem.

So, if he wants, God can use dreams and angels and stars, but he never promises to use them to guide us. He promises to be in his Word. "Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" not the stars. In Isaiah 55, God says my Word will not return to me empty. It accomplishes its purposes (Is. 55). Dreams, in contrast, are usually devoid of all reliable meaning. And the angels? Usually, it's just not necessary for God to send them as messengers, because we already have his Word, and it is enough.

Still today the Scriptures are “able to make us wise unto salvation.” That promise applies only to his Word, and nothing else. God’s Word is our lifeline out there. Don’t let culture shape what you believe and practice. Let Scripture do that. Let it teach you how to think as a child of God rather than a child of the world. Let it form and shape what you believe. Let it direct how you live and love, how you apologize and reconcile and forgive, how you serve, how you go about your work. Let Scripture point you to your Savior. Jesus said, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (Jn. 5:39). And Luke wrote, “All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). So the Scriptures will keep bringing you back to your Savior. Dreams and stars don’t do that, and angels don’t need to do that because God’s Word already does.

Sometimes the Word embarrasses us. But Luther compares the Scriptures to those strips of linen with which Mary wrapped the infant Jesus. “Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them” (AE 35:236). Thanks be to God. Amen.

