

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – January 6, 2019

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#) & [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Isaiah 60:1-6 (From *Homiletics*; “Epiphany Glory: It’s Good for You”, January 6, 2019)

A beautiful visual image begins this passage, especially for those who have ever seen the city of Jerusalem at sunrise from the vantage point of the Mount of Olives. The city, personified as always as a woman because the Hebrew word for “city” is grammatically feminine, is exhorted to “Arise, shine; for your light has come.” The light that has come to the city is the glory of the Lord which rises upon the city like the light of the rising sun. If you are sitting on the Mount of Olives looking west, as the eastern light tops the mountain from behind you and strikes the eastern walls of the city, it can look as if the city is both rising up from the shadows and shining with its own internal radiance. The white limestone walls reflect the light and glow in a bright, white-golden sheen that has been the subject of innumerable photographs.

It is a beautiful sight, but also one that is highly symbolic for the ancient Israelites. What could be more inspiring to post-exilic Israel than the image of their once-devastated capital holding her head high to receive the blessing of God’s favor? All the rest of the world and its nations may remain in darkness, but Israel, both as a nation and as a people, has been restored to God’s light.

This image of restored Zion is part of a much larger theme that runs throughout the book of Isaiah, namely the theme of God’s tumultuous relationship with Jerusalem and her inhabitants. Regardless of authorial schema that divide the book of Isaiah into two, three or even more literary units, the unifying theme of Jerusalem, her fall from grace and her restoration to divine favor, can be seen throughout all strata. And although those responsible for the final edited form of the book of Isaiah obviously had close ties to those who produced the Deuteronomistic history of Joshua through Kings (witness to the fact is the inclusion of 2 Kings 18:13, 17-20:19 as Isaiah 36:1-39:8), the image from Isaiah 60, of the “glory of the Lord,” also connects Isaiah with Ezekiel, which was a literary product of the ancient priestly community.

In Ezekiel, the *kavod*, or “glory of YHWH,” is spoken of as if it is an entity that acts with its own free will and motivation. It is spoken of in the third person as a means of avoiding the practice of referring directly to God. The glory of YHWH in Ezekiel is that part of God’s person that is described as mounting the chariot and leaving the temple in the final disgraceful days of the Solomonic temple’s existence. The glory of YHWH leaves the temple as a

sign of God's displeasure with the priests and the temple cult (Ezekiel 10:18-22). For this reason, Isaiah is saying something particularly significant when he declares that the glory of YHWH will once again shine on Jerusalem, casting the rest of the world into shadow. It is one way of declaring Jerusalem to be, once again, a fit place for YHWH to be worshiped, restoring the covenant relationship Israel enjoyed prior to the exile.

But if the return of God's favor and presence in the city were not enough, the prophet also promises that the former prominence of Jerusalem will be restored as well. People will come from far and near to see the restored city. Even royalty will come, as in the days when the Queen of Sheba came to see the wonders of Solomon's kingdom (1 Kings 10). Verses 6 and 7 describe the nations of the Arabian peninsula, including Sheba, from which the rich caravan trade of spices and other precious commodities would begin to flow into Israel once again. Contact with these nations not only implies a return to wealth. It also implies a restored connection to the larger family of allies Israel once claimed as part of its extended kin group. Midian, Ephah and Sheba are all Arab nations believed to descend from Abraham's third wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-4), and Kedar and Nebaioth are descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 25:12-13). Not only will these nations bring their wealth to Israel, they will also join in the worship of Israel's God, bringing offerings for God's temple.

In addition to these former allies from desert lands, new nations from the West (literally, from "the sea") will also become courtiers of the restored Jerusalem. This is particularly significant because never has Israel had allies come to her from across the Mediterranean. Only the hated Philistines, whose origin appears to be in the island culture found on Mycenae, traveled east to enter the land of Israel and then only as a rival nation, not an ally. It is possible that the prophet is reflecting positively on the growing contact between Israel and the emerging Hellenic culture from a vantage point prior to that nation becoming another in the series of imperial overlords of Israel.

Finally, the most precious of all treasures will return to the restored nation, namely, the lost children of the exile will return to the land of their origin. Families once divided by exile will be reunited. Those too small or weak to make the journey will come nonetheless, carried by others. The image of the city's "daughters" returning may well have another meaning also. In addition to referring to human beings who once lived in Judah returning to live there again, the passage may use the Hebrew word *banot*, or "daughter" to refer to small cities that surround a larger, "mother" city. So not only will Israel's people return, her smaller cities will be rebuilt and reinhabited — restored like their "mother," Jerusalem.

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of the city of Zion to the prophetic book of Isaiah. She is at the heart of God's presence on earth. The temple is there, and once the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., the bulk of the Israelite people live there. For generations after the fall of the north, the fate of Israel as a nation and the fate of the Judean capital city of Jerusalem were virtually inseparable. It is no wonder then that the restoration of that city to at least an approximation of her former wealth and vitality was of major interest to Israel's premier restoration prophet.

Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12

(From *Homiletics*; "Adoration of the Magi", January 6, 2013)

The gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus' ancestry -- he is the son both of Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1-17). Although the account of Jesus' birth follows immediately, the spotlight here is on Joseph rather than Mary in contrast to Luke (cf. Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-2:20). In particular, Joseph is told in a dream not to put his fiancée Mary away despite being "with child," and to name their son Jesus (i.e., "the Lord saves"). After narrating circumstances that could have potentially undermined the church's later claim about him, Matthew describes the first threat to Jesus' life when King Herod summoned the "wise men" who had come to Jerusalem "from the East."

According to Matthew, this threat arose "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem" (v. 1). "King Herod" is Herod the Great, who ruled Judea from 37 B.C. until 4 B.C., and had initially served as governor over Galilee (47-37 B.C.). After surviving several attempts to have him deposed, Herod was eventually appointed to govern Judea and given the title "King of Judea" (i.e., "King of the Jews") because he had proven himself to be a shrewd ruler. (For more on King Herod, see N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did*,

and Why He Matters [New York: HarperOne, 2011]: 112-14; and "Herodian Dynasty" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992]: 317-26.)

Given Herod's lengthy tenure as a despot, once the wise men reach Jerusalem and ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" it's no wonder that their query not only threatens Herod, but also Judea since the region's established political stability is immediately viewed as being vulnerable. The concern of the ruling class and populace is intensified further when the wise men (i.e., "astrologers" [μαγοι]) report a celestial sign confirming the birth of the new king -- "For we observed his star [αυτου τον αστερα] at its rising, and have come to pay him homage" (v. 2). Consequently, Matthew's remark in verse 3 -- "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened [εταραχθη; 'troubled', 'disturbed'], and all Jerusalem with him" -- is understandable.

After learning that a rival king had been born, Herod summons the religious leaders. He asks "the chief priests and scribes of the people ... where the Messiah [ο χριστος; i.e., God's anointed one] was to be born" (v. 4). They reply, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel'" (vv. 5-6). The response from Jerusalem's religious council is taken principally from Micah 5:2. It also appears to allude to 2 Samuel 5:2, which recounts the Lord's promise to David: "It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." From Matthew's perspective, this erudite response provides additional corroboration that the events surrounding Jesus' birth fulfill the words of Israel's prophets (cf. Matthew 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23).

All this confirms Herod's own suspicions concerning his nameless rival. King Herod can, therefore, no longer remain merely an observer. On the contrary, the inquiry by the wise men concerning the birth of a new sovereign, along with its subsequent verification by the religious ruling class, warrants action. Being a ruthless and savvy autocrat, Herod knows he must respond with dispatch if his family is to retain its imperial power. Accordingly, "Herod secretly [λαθρα; 'quietly'] called for the wise men [τους μαγους] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem" (vv. 7-8a).

Even though the birth of a rival king is beyond dispute, his exact identity remained a mystery. For that reason, Herod instructs the wise men to "Go and search diligently for the child" (v. 8). Ostensibly, Herod's purpose is to honor the new ruler, for he, like the wise men, seeks to "pay him homage" (v. 8; cf. v. 2). However, as Matthew makes clear in the following passage (i.e., Matthew 2:13-18), Herod's real aim is to execute the child and thus eliminate the threat to his familial throne.

Having heard King Herod's decree, the wise men "set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was" (v. 9). On one hand, Matthew's narration is challenging because many of us hold to a scientific model of the heavens. We do not believe that stars move across the sky and then stop, guiding nomadic astrologers to specific geographic locations. But God's ways are inexplicable at times, and even though Matthew's unscientific narrative seems incredulous, verse 10 reinforces his preceding declaration: "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

On the other hand, it's paramount to stress that despite references to celestial phenomena, the gospel of Matthew is not an astronomy book -- neither ancient nor modern. Rather, this portion of the First Gospel is Matthew's explanation of the confluence of exceptional events associated with Jesus' birth. Simply put, it is written through the eyes of faith. Matthew is not concerned with the starry sky; his chief concern is to convey that once these itinerant wise men found the new king, "they were overwhelmed with joy [εχαρησαν χαραν μεγαλην σφοδρα]," regardless of the means by which they were led.

Though perhaps weary from their journey, once they entered the house and "saw the child with Mary his mother," they did what they set out to do: "they knelt down [προσκυνησαν] and paid him homage [προσεκυνησαν αυτω; or, 'worshiped him']" (v. 11; cf. v. 2). And before leaving, "they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh," offerings associated with Zion's coming glory and the anointing of priests (v. 12; cf. Isaiah 60:5-6; Exodus 30:23-32).

Matthew's birth narrative ends with the wise men's responding once again to another divine communiqué. Rather than following Herod's decree, they are "warned in a dream not to return to" him (v. 12; cf. Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 22).

A star initially led them to Bethlehem; this time a dream leads the wise men safely home when "they left for their own country by another road," a gripping tale that appropriately inspired one well-known American songwriter (see James Taylor, "Home by Another Way," in *Never Die Young* [New York: Columbia, 1988]).

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Isaiah 60:1-6:

1. This text begins with the arresting words, "Arise, shine; for your light has come," dovetailing very nicely with our Advent celebrations and Christmas candle lighting practices. As noted in the commentary above, for the ancient Israelites, this promised light was to be seen in Jerusalem – the heart and symbolic center of their lives and faith. Where do you we look for the light today? What is our symbolic center – the place where we expect and long to see God incarnate and at work bringing the light of a new dawn to our world?
2. From Callie Plunket-Brewton ([workingpreacher.org](#), 1/6/2016): *The original recipients of this prophetic word were Jews living in Judah -- now the Persian province of Jehud -- in the period following the Babylonian exile. Living in reduced circumstances amidst the rubble of a wealthier time, the people's historical visions of a glorious Zion might have seemed a distant fantasy. Zion, both the geographical locale as well the idea of a sacred bond between people, place, and God, was in ruins. The Zion poems of Isa 40-66 represent an attempt to rebuild the idea of Zion and to infuse her with a new vigor. This effort is not simply to make people feel better nor to reclaim a theological idea for its own sake. The purpose of the rehabilitation of Zion is to inspire and empower the people to help make this glorious vision a reality. Isa 60:1-6 is, thus, not a simplistic prediction of a new age but contains a call, an imperative, to be a part of the restoration of Zion.* How might these words function as an imperative for us as well? What are we being called to be a part of today through these ancient words?

Reflection Questions on Matthew 2:1-12:

1. The story of the magi visiting Jesus – occurring only in Matthew’s gospel – is featured on the Feast of Epiphany. Why do you think this might be? (If you are not familiar with Epiphany, you can learn more about it on Wikipedia by clicking [here](#).) What themes in the story make it fitting for this movement in the Christian Liturgical Year?
2. Ever try making a single story out of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke by following the texts themselves? It isn’t easy. Despite our traditional mash-ups in our Christmas pageants and nativity scenes, the two stories are very different, and at points irreconcilable on a literal basis. How do you make sense of these differences? What might the distinctive inclusion of these magi in Matthew’s gospel tell us about the author’s perspective on the “good news” (especially when held alongside the distinctive inclusion of the shepherds in Luke’s account)?
3. From Jan Schnell Rippentrop (workingpreacher.org, 1/6/2018): *Dreams, like the wise men’s dream in verse 12, serve an important function in the Matthean birth narrative. In ancient Near Eastern society, dreams were viewed as supernatural and as crucial methods of divine communication with humans. Joseph married Mary, left Bethlehem, and returned to Nazareth (instead of Bethlehem) all on account of listening to dreams. Similarly, the wise men averted disaster by listening to their dream and returning “by another road.” What part do spiritual practices and dreams have in the way your community discerns the path ahead? There are plenty of roadblocks out there currently in any given congregation. How is it that you might communally discern if there is a new way forward by another road?*

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?