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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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God Leads Us to See the Light

Matthew 2:10-12

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Matthew 2:10–12 ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, and Christ Jesus our Lord, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Timothy 1:2,9,10)

In His name, dear fellow redeemed,

Sitting under the Bodhi Tree, Siddhartha meditated. He sat facing the full moon to the east. He sat, contemplating questions of suffering and death. During a night of meditation, Siddhartha reached a state of profound understanding. Buddhists call it “bodhi” or “enlightenment.” He began to see suffering, aging, and death in a new way as a part of life; he also imagined a way of release. A way of escape which would later be termed the eight-fold path. He imagined way where a person could rid himself of emotions, and deny himself of any selfish desire. This way of release would form the Buddhist way. They call it the path to enlightenment. And so he gave himself a new name. He began to call himself the Buddha, that is, “the Awakened” or “the Enlightened One.”

As Christians we can agree with the Buddhist that suffering is a part of this life. We can also agree that there is a way of release. But there is a significant difference. The difference is that we are not released from suffering by something found within. We are enlightened by a light which shines from without; by a light which shines forth from Bethlehem. As the prophet Isaiah writes:

Isaiah 60:1–3 Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.

In contrast to the Buddha's way; God leads us to see the light – not in us, but in the coming of His Son in Bethlehem.

1. By Divine Revelation

Buddhism is a religion of the east. 99% of its population today lives in Asia and the Pacific. With its roots in Hinduism, the origins of Buddhism comes from India dating to about the fifth century before Christ. This means that by the time of Christ, the Hindu and Buddhist way of thinking would have been prominent in the eastern world. It is likely that the wise men who come from the East would have been familiar with such an eastern mindset.

These were Persian holy men, a religious order of astrologers and magicians – hence the Greek name: "Magi." They are about equivalent to the chief priests of Israel in their religious prestige. And yet, here they are far from their eastern ways, arriving in Jerusalem, and seeking a king that is not their own. An unexpected thing had happened to these Gentiles. God had led them to see the light. And He had done so by His divine revelation.

How unlikely were these men? Not only were they Gentiles, but also they were sorcerers; they were superstitious astrologers. We read in Deuteronomy 18 that such occult practices are an abomination to the LORD; against the 2nd commandment. And yet these men are among the first, besides the shepherds, to see the great light that rises from Judea. They are among the first to see the glory of the LORD which has risen upon Israel. It must have changed them. The eastern mindset was left behind, and their path turned toward the light of Christ. However unlikely, these Gentiles are led to see the light of Christ by God's divine revelation.

But isn't this just the way the revelation of God works? The star doesn't appear to the learned religious and political leaders of Israel. The chief priests are completely unaware that the Christ has been born and is over a year old by now. Instead the light is seen afar off. Those who walk in darkness have seen a great light. This is just the way God's grace comes to us.

We should consider ourselves equally unlikely. For we too are Gentiles. We have no inherent claim to this king – the King of the Jews. By nature we should be considered an enemy; a foreigner to the Jewish King. Think of all the pagan influences around us, all the influences that are contrary to the ways of the LORD God. Think of all the superstitious and sinful things we do. We are easily led astray by any number of pagan signs: perhaps we are influenced by an unseen voice that we believe guides us as to what is right and wrong; maybe we think a more committed resolve will improve my life in 2014; or perhaps we have been led to think that some sort of random luck is what protects us each day. Are we so much different than those astrologers? If not for the light of God’s revelation, we walk in darkness.

But God gives us light. Paul calls it a mystery. A mystery hidden from the ages, but now made known to us by the gospel. God has given the light of salvation to Gentiles.

It is more than just a star that reveals this. Notice how the wise men do not follow just a star. When they arrive, they say “where is He who has been born King of the Jews.” They expect the Jewish Messiah and they expect Him here, in the center of the Jewish religion, in Jerusalem. The promises of God had found their way into the hands of these Gentiles.

The most likely explanation for this is the Jewish captivity. Some 600 years earlier Jerusalem was besieged by an eastern people known as the Babylonians. For 70’s years the Jews had been held captive in Babylon and their stay left its influence. God’s light shone in the east. Somewhere in their studies; somewhere in their library; somewhere in their search for truth, these wise men caught a glimpse of Christ. They caught a glimpse of that star hidden away in prophecies like Numbers 24:

Numbers 24:17 “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, And batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of tumult.

It is more than a star which shines. We too have seen the light. But it has not come by sitting under the Bodhi Tree with out own inner thoughts; rather it is sitting here, beneath the rising glory of God’s Word that we see the light. It is here that, like the wise men, God reveals something divine: a word which leads us to Bethlehem, as the priests confirm:

Micah 5:2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.”

The Scripture is our light. And it leads out of this pagan world and into the shining grace of Christ. God's revelation is not found in some inner voice, some new resolve, or some random luck. The wise men needed more than the star. It was the Word which revealed the King of the Jews – not among the learned religious and political leaders of the world; but in the simple voice of Bethlehem. The Scriptures are the divine revelation that leads us to see the light and that light is Christ.

2. In Divine Worship

Legend says that as the Buddha lay on his death bed he left his disciples with the following advice: "You must be your own lamps, be your own refuge. Take refuge in nothing outside of yourselves. Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything besides yourselves." In other words, the Buddha's final instruction was this: Trust in yourself (Michael Malloy, *Experiencing the World's Religions*). It is a worship which is centered within. A worship of works.

But the way to worship the LORD is different. When the wise men reach Bethlehem they respond to something very much outside of themselves. They rejoice not in some ideal to be reached – for then we could never rejoice. Instead they rejoice in a perfection freely and simply given to them. This encounter with Jesus works in the wise men something that the Buddhist religion knows nothing about: faith in Jesus. It is by faith that they follow the star and it is by faith that they bows in divine worship before their King.

This is something that cannot be seen with the eyes. As the wise men enter that house they see nothing more than a mother holding a young child. There is no halo over Mary. There is no glow about the child. But a light shines nonetheless. Upon them a light shines. God's divine revelation shines, and it leads them to believe – to see the light. And so their worship is the worship of faith – in things not seen. God reveals to them that this was the Son of God; the One chosen to take away their sins.

And from there everything is free. True nirvana. True liberation. Because there is no constraint to come; no obligation to bow; no demand for their gold. They were free, because the coming of this Child had freed them; taken their place; won their allegiance. They followed that star and they bowed their faces to the dusty floor of that village home because they were free. Only in the liberation which God gives in Christ can divine worship take place.

For God accepts our worship not because of our insights; not because we have reached perfection, not because of our self-control or self-denial. He accepts our worship because of His divine love on account of faith in Jesus.

2 Corinthians 4:6 For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The LORD has arisen over Israel and has drawn us, Gentiles, to see the light of Bethlehem. And, like the magi, we believe not because we see, but because God's Word commands light to shine. And the light reveals that this Child is the Christ. The Christ who has come for you. The Christ who has died for you. The Christ who now lives for you. Buddha is dead, but Jesus lives. And His resurrection is the dawn of God's glory upon us. From it rises God's grace and forgiveness upon you even today. However far off you might be, how ever far off you might have strayed, God draws you back again by the glory of His coming, that you might bow to Him alone.

And so all that we do here is free: the confession of our sins, the praises we offer, the prayers we offer, the offering we collect. We should think no differently of the offering plate we pass than we do of those wise men who presented their gifts to Jesus. There is no difference as God is concerned. God does not accept our offerings by telling you what you must do. He accepts your offerings by telling you what He has done. By liberating you through resurrection of His Son.

Isaiah 60:5–6 Then you shall see and become radiant, And your heart shall swell with joy; Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you. The multitude of camels shall cover your land, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.

God leads us to see the light in divine worship.

3. By Divine Guidance

Dukkha is a word meant to encompass any type of suffering: from the horrible to the everyday frustration. The Buddhists speak of Dukkha as the ever changing circumstances of this life. For instance: having a body means we can become tired and sick; having a mind means we can be troubled and discouraged. The future is always uncertain. And every day, we have to decide what to do with the rest of our lives. Dukkha means suffering and dissatisfaction.

With this we can agree. Life is full of uncertain circumstances. The wise men assumed King Herod was sending them only so that he himself could come and worship the Christ. But really, he was just making plans to kill Jesus. The wise men had no idea that returning to Herod would threaten their future or the future of God's kingdom.

Yet there is a divine force that at work which Buddhism does not take into consideration. There is a divine guidance that comes from heaven and cares for people on earth.

Despite all that King Herod would do to stand against King Jesus, He would not succeed. Herod – or as historians call him: Herod the Great – was not so great that he could overthrow the poor carpenters family from Nazareth. There was a divine guidance at work watching over God's people.

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

There is much Dukkha that stands against Jesus and His kingdom. It is all around us. We do experience suffering. We do experience ever changing circumstances. But King Herod does not stand a chance. He does not threaten our future. God may not visit you in a dream, but He does other things to guide You. He visits You in His Word revealing the way of faith and love in Christ. He is with You in His Sacraments giving His very life as eternal protection for your body and soul. And He visits you in the caring Christians around you, who pray for you, who give you advice, and who help you in whatever Dukkha you might face. For this is the body of Christ – and there is no safer place to be. It is where the light shines.

So what sets Christianity apart from Buddhism? What ultimately sets Christianity apart from all other religions is that our God lives. He died and now lives. We need no statues to remind us of Him; for God is not made of stone; but is born of flesh and blood. We need no eightfold path; for our path is walked by Christ. We need not earn our way to liberation; for God's has freed us by sending His Son in our place, in our flesh. Now you've found inner peace; inner peace which is illumined: in the light of God's divine revelation, in the experience of God's grace in divine worship, and by the ever living presence of God's divine guidance.

Amen.