

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
Service of Daily Prayer -- Morning
December 20, 2020

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: **Amen.**

P: In the morning, O Lord, You hear my voice;

C: **In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for You and watch.**

Psalm 5:3

P: My mouth is filled with Your praise,

C: **and with Your glory all the day.**

Psalm 71:8

P: O Lord, open my lips,

C: **and my mouth will declare Your praise.**

Psalm 51:15

**All: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Numbers 24:15-19

"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,
the oracle of him who hears the words of God,
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
falling down with his eyes uncovered:
I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
Edom shall be dispossessed;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.
Israel is doing valiantly.
And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion
and destroy the survivors of cities!"

Romans 16:25-27

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel

said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Hymn: *LSB 357, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*



1 O come, O come, Em - man - u - el, And ran - som
 2 O come, Thou Wis - dom from on high, Who or - d'rest
 3 O come, O come, Thou Lord of might, Who to Thy
 4 O come, Thou Branch of Jes - se's tree, Free them from



cap - tive Is - ra - el, That mourns in lone - ly
 all things might - i - ly; To us the path of
 tribes on Si - nai's height In an - cient times didst
 Sa - tan's tyr - an - ny That trust Thy might - y



ex - ile here Un - til the Son of God ap - pear.
 knowl - edge show, And teach us in her ways to go.
 give the Law In cloud and maj - es - ty and awe.
 pow'r to save, And give them vic - t'ry o'er the grave.



Refrain
 Re - jice! Re - jice! Em - man - u - el



Shall come to thee, O Is - ra - el!

- 5 O come, Thou Key of David, come,
 And open wide our heav'nly home;
 Make safe the way that leads on high,
 And close the path to misery. *Refrain*

- 6 O come, Thou Dayspring from on high,
 And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
 Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
 And death's dark shadows put to flight. *Refrain*

- 7 O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace. *Refrain*

Sermon

At this time of year, a star is a common sight. As a part of our Christmas decorations, we often include a star in reference to the star that guides the Magi. First it brings them to Jerusalem, then all the way to Bethlehem to find Jesus, who they worship and honor with gifts. Matthew chapter 2 says “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” -- that’s just about as emphatic a statement as Greek can make, that they were absolutely overjoyed beyond all measure. Their joy is one we share at Christmas time, and the star that brought them that joy is another Christmas symbol for our own celebration.

Today we see a star in the Old Testament, too. This reading from Numbers takes us back to the time of Moses, as the Israelites are towards the end of their forty years in the wilderness. They left Egypt in the Exodus and received the Law from God at Mount Sinai, but for their disobedience and faithlessness they were kept out of the Promised Land for another generation. Finally, as they approach the border at the river Jordan, some of the nearby kings start to get anxious at this large group camped on their doorstep.

That’s where today’s text comes in, and this mysterious figure named Balaam. One of the Canaanite kings calls him in to help deal with the Israelite threat: apparently Balaam was already known in the region as a prophet or person of spiritual authority. So this king hires Balaam: he says, I’ll pay you to go place a curse on these Israelites. God told him repeatedly not to go and not to pronounce any curse against them because God’s own blessing was already with them; but Balaam was apparently too greedy for all that silver and gold, and kept trying to find a way around God’s Word.

Isn’t that the way it is with human beings all the time? Even when we know the Word of God and we know the clear command and will of God in a certain matter -- say, for example, that some thing or other is a sin according to the Bible -- yet we still try to find a way around God. We try to find an excuse or justification that what we want isn’t really what God is talking about. One of the most fundamental temptations for humanity is the one the serpent used on Eve in Eden: “Did God really say...?”

But Balaam goes up on a mountain looking out over the Israelite camp. The Canaanites hired him to curse the Hebrews, and that king soon regrets it because Balaam declares he can only speak God’s Word: he must bless the Israelites because they are the ones that God has already blessed. Four times, this happens: the king brings him to different spots looking out over the camp, thinking “Okay, that spot wasn’t great. Let’s try over here! Maybe on this mountain God will let you curse them instead of blessing them!” Four times, Balaam blesses them even though he does so somewhat reluctantly; he would have been glad to curse them, to please the king and get his gold, but nevertheless he speaks God’s Word.

This reading today is the fourth and final one of those. It’s clear that this particular revelation is something in the distant future: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.” God gives sight and prophecy there, 1,400 years before Christ is born, of the coming king from this rag-tag group of desert wanderers. It will be in a future far distant in a human perspective, but it will happen.

The scepter is clear enough: a symbol of the authority of a king. The star points us to God’s promises and the fulfillment of them in Jesus: God told Abraham that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky, and this promise is repeated about the children of Jacob. And

here, the star of Jacob appears again; but it's not just so many offspring like so many stars, but a single one, "a star shall come out of Jacob."

We see this is Jesus not only in the miraculous star that appeared to the Magi to lead the way, but also in Revelation where Jesus tells us, "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." Certainly he is the one of Jacob's descendants who will hold the ultimate royal authority. Of course you're expecting the ultimate reference here to be about Jesus. When Gabriel appears to Mary announcing her miraculous pregnancy with the Son of God, he tells her "he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end," recalling the star of Jacob with all power and authority.

Many Christians, going back to the earliest years of the Church, have believed this was the passage the Magi used to understand the spiritual importance of the star they saw; when they were taken to Babylon in exile, the Jewish people brought their Scripture with them, and many Jews like Daniel and Esther remained in the East even while others returned to Israel -- through them, eastern Magi could have had access to these books and connected a new, unexpected star with the star of Jacob and scepter of royalty. A special star over Israel proclaims the birth of an Israelite king!

God works in mysterious ways, the saying goes. We don't know exactly who Balaam was, but he wasn't an Israelite and he seems to have been a prophet-for-hire, to bless or curse whoever paid him well enough to bless and curse. But God still speaks truly through him and compels him (against his will) to bless and prophesy. The Magi were also Gentiles, the kind of astrologers and court advisers who are normally the bad guys; in Daniel's time, the Magi in Babylon and Persia were the ones who opposed and undermined him. And yet, here are Magi showing up to worship and honor the newborn Messiah when the whole people of Judea have no clue what's happened!

The rest of the passage doesn't seem to fit, though. Who are Moab or Edom, the sons of Sheth or Seir? And if this is talking about Jesus, why does it all sound so violent? This is language of conquest, crushing your enemies, exercising power and destroying. How exactly does this fit with Jesus? Well, as is the case in understanding everything (especially in the Bible) we have to take into account the context: in terms of writing style, this is a more poetic kind of passage -- so I think we're not talking about the literal nations of Moab and Edom.

Both of them are next-door neighbors to Israel, and like many people, it's your close neighbors who are often the hardest to get along with because they're the ones you have to see and live with all the time. There were so many wars and arguments and bitter feelings between the Israelites and the people of Moab and Edom that those countries become somewhat symbolic throughout the Old Testament for "people who are enemies of Israel," and by extension, "people who are enemies of God's people."

I think that's the point that God is making here, speaking through the reluctant prophet Balaam in terms that people 1,400 years before Christ could connect with: this promised one who is coming in the distant future, this royal star of Jacob, is going to conquer all the enemies of God's people. He is coming to take on our enemies and wage war against them. Even Isaiah, in the well-known "to us a child is born" prophecy about the Messiah, even there he also talks about him as a victorious warrior. The picture of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" that many have in their minds is true, but it's not the whole story: he is gentle to his people, but he is ferocious against the enemies of his people, absolutely victorious over evil and those who reject him.

The real question is, who are those enemies? Ephesians six reminds us "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but... against the spiritual forces of evil." Even in the Old Testament, as the Israelites fight against the other tribes and nations in Canaan, it's clear that one of the reasons is the kind of terrible idolatry that they tempted Israel with. They were not a danger to Israel because they weren't also Israelites; they were a danger to Israel because of the spiritual threat they presented. This

royal Star of Jacob will totally eliminate all the enemies of God's people, and that is exactly what Jesus did.

In American Christianity, it seems to me that we often focus on Christ as the victim, the sacrifice for the sins of the world, and the subsequent forgiveness we have through him. That's entirely Biblical and true. But the Bible also talks a lot about Christ as the victorious conqueror, taking on Satan, death, and all the powers of sin and evil in the world, and by his own death and resurrection totally overcoming and defeating them. That is the picture we have here for the future promise, the Star that signals the end for our true enemies is near.

This year has shown how afraid we are of even a slight chance death. But Scripture tells us differently: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Evil and faithlessness and opposition to the Church seem to grow around us, but Jesus tells us: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." The one who gives us victory, the one who defeats death and the devil for us, is known by the star; like the Magi, may that bring us great joy.

Apostles' Creed

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom**

**and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

Prayers

Prayers for the Church, our community and nation, the sick, etc.

C: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

P: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.