O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

On the surface, this story is altogether familiar, even pedestrian.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men [or ‘Magi’] from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

And thereafter, they appear in every nativity scene near you. Three kings of different races come with gifts, each decked in Persian regalia, complete with crowns, to bid the stable-born boy homage. Cue the band: “We Three Kings of orient are, bearing gifts we travel so far….”

But do not let your acquaintance with this story inure you from its oddity, for it is an odd story indeed. Odd, and important.

For starters, let’s separate out some myths. Tradition has suggested there were three because there were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We have, in fact, assigned the three names—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar—and they’ve even been canonized as saints. The three typically don that royal insignia because our reading of this passage has been colored by prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures (take, for instance, Isaiah 60: “Arise shine, for your light has come… Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”). And, of course, there’s that famous carol, “We Three Kings,” penned in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins, Jr. (rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania). As carols and nativity scenes shape our imaginations, we can vividly see these Three Kings right there next to the shepherds, sheep, and goats (!).

Most of this is an imaginative embellishment of Matthew’s account. Matthew doesn’t tell us there were three, nor that they were kings. All Matthew tells us is that they were, in the Greek, mágoi—plural of magus. There is no specific number mentioned, it’s just plural; i.e., more than one. Some traditions place the number at twelve (a nice, round, biblical number that). Maybe there were more, maybe less. Three seems a little small, especially if you consider the usual size of caravans that would have travelled from the “east” (likely Persia, modern Iran—at least an 850-mile, 300-hour journey across perilous desert terrain). And, unless we’re reading passages like Isaiah 60 back into the text, there’s no particular reason to think they were kings. That Greek word—mágoi—does not refer to kings but more specifically to one with mystic wisdom, or a practitioner of unusual powers. It is the root of our word “magic” or “magician” (“magic” = the art of the magi). Therefore, that more simple and direct translation of “magi” might be best, even if it is essentially without any direct corollary to our modern world. There is, I should add, a noncanonical, apocryphal text—the Syriac Infancy Gospel—that suggests these so-called “magi” were actually Zoroastrian astrologer-priests, which is plausible (it also suggests, by the way, that their number was twelve). I’ll come back to that idea of Zoroastrian astrologer-priests in a moment. But note too, and finally, that the text does not say they visited the Holy Family in a stable (sorry pageant and nativity lovers everywhere!); it instead
specifically states they visited him in a house (οἰκίαν, oikian), with only “Mary, his mother” mentioned as present (sorry, Joseph, angels, shepherds, donkey, and goats).

Sorry to deconstruct your nativity scene here… and I don’t mean to split hairs. But I think to strip these figures of layer upon layer of mythical lore might help us recover a clearer sense of who they actually were. And why it matters, why this story matters. For us. Today.

Just consider that possibility that there were not Three Kings, but some number (twelve? more?) of Zoroastrian astrologer-priests. Leaving aside how this means that God’s providential plans for the salvation of the world were revealed to Persian Zoroastrian astrologer-priests at the exact same time those plans were being revealed to the likes of Mary and Elizabeth, God’s chosen people, consider what it means for God to be revealed to them according to their own ways of knowing and seeing the world: by their astrological arts.

First, remember what stars are: remote incandescent bodies, luminous spheroids of radiant plasma held together by their own gravity, flung throughout the furthest reaches of the Universe, “light years” away (that is: the distance that light travels in one year, 6 trillion miles). For instance, Polaris, or the North Star, is 680 lightyears away—which means when we look up into the night sky to gaze at the North Star, what we see is 680-year-old light; light that has been travelling to us since, oh, January 6, 1339. And that’s when a star is already formed! The process of formation itself can take anywhere from 100,000 to 10 million years before the dense core even emits first light—only then to travel however many trillions of miles across the universe to reach our eyes on this little rock we call Earth.

Which is to say, in short, that somewhere between 100,000 and 10 million years before these Zoroastrian priests were consulting their astrological charts, God was hatching a plan wherein swirling gas would one day birth a particular star in a particular place to reveal the arrival of a baby in Bethlehem.

Can you begin to wrap your mind around that?

We can scoff and think that’s ridiculous, implausible. And Matthew would probably agree, though he may turn it around on us and suggest: implausible indeed… that God would love us that much.

And God revealed Godself to them according to their own way of knowing, their own understanding.

We often assume that Christianity requires a conversion to a different way of thinking. That is certainly a part of our tradition, what the Scriptures call a metanoia—literally, a turning or changing of mind. There is an element of, as St Anselm put it, “faith seeking understanding” (fides quaerens intellectum). Or, as one father seeking healing for his son put it, in one of my favorite verses of the Bible: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9.24) There is that aspect of Christianity that can never be fully understood unless and until it is first believed, unless and until we give up our need for control and open ourselves up to the confounding mystery of God’s limitless love.

But God does not first come to us as a confounding mystery. The whole point of creation, leading up to the incarnation of God into God’s creation, is to meet us where we are. To stoop to our level,
to allow us some way of grasping the grandeur that is God. That is what God is doing with creation, indeed with the incarnation. And that is what God is again doing here with a star that apparently appeared on the predictive charts of Zoroastrian astrologer-priests. God is meeting them where they are, according to their own ways of seeing and knowing the world, to call them into relationship. For God is not just some distant deity. God could have been that, but God chose to come close—sometimes so close that we cannot see what is right before our very eyes.

And that very same God is ready to meet you where you are today, to stoop to your level. The same God that hatched a plan for the creation and salvation of the world (that somehow involved the formation of a star in the far reaches of our universe millions of years ago) is right here, right now—ready to be revealed again to you, right where you are.

The question is: Will you see it for what it is? Not just a distant ball of incandescent plasma in the cold reaches of an empty Universe, but a foreordained emblem intentionally placed in creation to lead you into relationship with your Creator?

Will you be able to see it for what it is? Not just some star, but a sign. Not just another blinking light, but a glimmer of hope in the darkness.

Will you be able to see it for what it is? And, more especially, will you be able to accept that you are so loved? Amen.