

## “Nations Shall Come To Your Light”

Isaiah 60:1-6

One of the most iconic films to take place in the state of Iowa is Field of Dreams. It's the story of a farmer who builds a baseball field in a cornfield to follow a voice only he can hear, a voice that keeps repeating the line, "If you build it, they will come." And the film ends with a line of cars coming to see the field of dreams, to see what has been built.

Why do they come? James Earl Jones' character, a reclusive author who has been brought out of his isolation because of this quest, sums it up in his iconic speech. "Ray, people will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway, not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past. "Of course, we won't mind if you look around," you'll say. "It's only twenty dollars per person." They'll pass over the money without even thinking about it. For it is money they have and peace they lack. ... This field, this game -- it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and it could be again."

That's the promise that we find in the Isaiah reading today. Active before the exile but looking ahead to their return from exile, Isaiah tells the people to look not just to their past, but to their future with the words, "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." Isaiah reminds his hearers of all that once was good, and it could be again.

In the long past glory days of Israel under kings David and Solomon, nations did stream to Jerusalem. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he prayed for the foreigners who would come to worship at the temple, those of other

nations who would come to know the one true God. Solomon famously welcomed the Queen of Sheba and others, who came to marvel at his wisdom and all he had built.

The nations didn't stream to Jerusalem to see a baseball field. They came to see the temple. They came to see what God had done for his people. They came to see how this backwater nation had grown so powerful. It had happened only because of God.

In Isaiah's days, the only nations that streamed to Jerusalem were the ones trying to conquer it. Assyrians and Egyptians had besieged it or passed by while searching for more valuable land to conquer. The Babylonians had admired the temple when shown it by King Hezekiah, but only so they could see how full of treasure it was and how valuable it would be if they conquered and looted it.

Yet we see this prophecy fulfilled in what we celebrate today, the story of the Epiphany. Wise men came from the east. The nations streamed to the light of the world. They came to see what God had done and was doing. They came to see God at work, God in the flesh, God with us. They came to see the miraculous event, that God had come into the world to be with his people.

Despite what we sing in the carol, "We three kings of Orient are/bearing gifts we traverse afar," the wise men were not kings. There also weren't necessarily three of them. The Bible mentions three gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), but that doesn't mean that there were three gift givers. They also weren't from the Orient (East Asia); they were most likely Persian or Babylonian. Matthew calls them

“magi,” which is more of an astrologer-priest from various Near Eastern religions than it is a bookish man of knowledge or scientist of some kind. But maybe they were the intellectual descendants of Daniel and the other Israelite exiles.

Some of those Israelites brought into exile to Babylon remained after others returned with Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem. Copies of their scrolls remained behind, too, including copies of the Old Testament scriptures. With those writings in hand, along with their interest in the stars of the sky and their movement and meanings, the magi, the wise men, were able to see the appearance of the star, discover its meaning, and set off on an expedition to find the newborn king. They had an epiphany, and the flash of understanding sent them off on their journey.

Whoever they were and whatever they followed, the magi reveal to us even the story of Jesus’ birth isn’t complete without Gentiles in it, without the nations streaming to the light of the world. Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus, which includes several Gentile women. Even Matthew, the Gospel described as the most Jewish because of its focus on how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of Jesus, isn’t complete without people from other nations.

It’s easy to see that when you look back at the Old Testament knowing God’s plan was and is to save all people, just like it’s easier to find the clues you missed in a mystery once you know how it all turns out. When you look back and see how God used the Gentile women like Ruth and Rahab in Jesus’ genealogy, how God cared for the Syrian general Naaman, how God used the way he rescued his people to bring Egypt and Babylon to know about him (even if it never stuck), how God promised through the

prophets that all people would come together to worship the one true God, you can see the clues were always there.

That’s what Paul reminds the Ephesians of, that “Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Through the Gospel, through the good news of Jesus, nationality doesn’t matter. All nations, all people, are only saved through Jesus.

Now, we still have nations come to the light. Although fewer now than a decade ago, international students still come from all over the world to study at Iowa State. Students come from China and South Korea, India and Indonesia, South Africa and Ethiopia and Brazil and countries in-between. The best and brightest students of these countries and their families travel to the United States to do further research, to study under experts in their fields, to improve their English skills. They sojourn here, living in Ames for a few months or a few years, before returning to their homelands or heading off to somewhere new with new skills and knowledge, new ideas, and hopefully a new faith. They come with curiosity, and wonder about all that they’ve seen and heard.

Last week, Pastor Mark mentioned how the missionaries in Germany report large numbers of Persian immigrants coming to faith. Missionaries don’t just need to know German; they need to know Farsi too! Even if the post-modern, post-churched native Germans aren’t going to church anymore, others are coming to faith. Nations are still streaming to the light of Christ.

Even baseball, called America’s pastime, is international. The big story in baseball this week is where Japanese players will join after having played in Japan. International draft

pools with players from South Korea, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere remind us of the international flavor of baseball. The Field of Dreams movie set has now been used as the site for two major league baseball games, with another one happening this summer. It was built, and now people come from all over the world to see it.

Nations will come, says Isaiah. They won't come to a baseball field in the middle of cornfields. They won't come to a temple on a disputed site in Jerusalem. But the nations will come. They will come to worship the God who came in the flesh. They will come to worship the God who came to save all people from their sins. That's truly good news.

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