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The Epiphany of Our Lord

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Jesus Appears as the Savior of All Nations

The Christian Church celebrates the Epiphany of Our Lord on January 6. The story of the Christmas star that appeared to the Magi sets the focus for the Epiphany festival and its season: The brilliance of Jesus' forgiving love shines for all the world to see. We take comfort and gain courage as we believe that nothing hinders the spread of the good news about Jesus.

Sermon Numbers 24:15-17

The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."

Introduction: Balaam was a loser. We might call Balaam a prophet since he could predict the future and then pronounce blessings or curses based on what he saw. Isaiah and Daniel were prophets, too. But Balaam was different. He wasn't one of God's chosen people and God never chose him to be a prophet. He was an independent contractor; he would do blessings and curses for money.

So the people of Israel were marching toward the Promised Land and wiping out local armies on their way. Moab was next on the list and Balak, the Moab king, was scared. He got in touch with Balaam and offered him good money to put a curse on Israel. This is where the Lord got involved: he told Balaam not to do it. Balaam agreed but he started to play games; he was looking for the best deal. So he saddled his donkey and headed for Moab. Now God was really angry. He sent the angel of the Lord (and this wasn't just any angel; this was the Son of God before he became Jesus)—he sent the angel of the Lord to stop Balaam. And now God played tricks. Balaam couldn't see the angel, but the donkey could. The donkey would stop every time it saw the angel and Balaam would beat the donkey every time it stopped. Finally the donkey got mad and spoke up. You got it: the donkey talked to Balaam. When your donkey sees an angel you can't see, you're a loser. When you beat your donkey and your donkey talks back to you, you're really a loser!

Of course, in the end God was the winner. Balaam got to Moab and Balak welcomed him with open arms. Trouble was, everything Balaam said was a blessing for Israel and not a curse. The Israelis eventually killed him and that was the end of Balaam. But his name lived on. Old Testament Jews considered Balaam a notorious cheater. Peter, Jude, and John all condemned him in the New Testament as a man who **loved the wages of wickedness**. Balaam was a loser. He lost his job, his money, his reputation, and his donkey. Of course, he also lost the Lord. Balaam was the ultimate loser.

What's fascinating is that the Lord used Balaam the loser to point people to Bethlehem. Balaam issued seven messages and this was part of message number four: **I see him, but not now; I behold him but not near. A Star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will arise out of Israel.** Balaam couldn't have known what he was seeing or saying; he was nothing more than the Lord's microphone. And only a few in Israel knew what he was seeing and saying. But we know what Balaam was seeing and we know who he was talking about. This is Jesus, the star and the scepter of God's plan to save us. What amazes us that

The Lord Uses Losers to Bring Light to the World

Balaam's prophecy isn't the only place in the Bible where Jesus is called a star. Peter and John call Jesus the bright Morning Star. That's the star we sang about in the Hymn of the Day this morning, "How Lovely Shines the Morning Star." The morning star probably refers to Venus, a planet which reflects the sun's rays just before the sun rises in the morning. Balaam's star is more like any star that we see shining in the sky at night. The picture is the same. A star proclaims hope in the middle of a black sky. Jesus brings hope to a world made dark because of sin.

You and I are so used to light that it's hard for us to imagine what dark is. Dark is when the power goes off on a moonless night. Dark is when the guide switches off the lights in Mammoth Cave, KY. But the light always comes back on. For us, the light of Jesus' love always comes back on. But it isn't like that for everyone. Everything about God is black for them. The Bible is a rule book for them and they don't see themselves obeying the rules. The cross for them is a symbol they see in churches but they can't see the Savior who forgave their sins there. Life is hazy maze for them and they keep getting lost looking to find triumphs and avoid troubles. Their path to their future has no lights, no signs, no arrows. This is what life is like for them, and this is what life would be like for us if we lived in their dark world.

We don't live in their dark world. The star of Jacob and the bright Morning Star shines in our world; the sun of righteousness rises with healing in its wings for us. Jesus said, **I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.** The Holy Spirit called us by the gospel and enlightened us with his gifts. We see the law that condemns us but we also see the cross that saved us. We see our challenges but we also see God's solutions. We see the troubles of life but we also see the triumphs of grace. We see the future with confidence and longing. Just as God promised, a Jewish virgin gave birth to King David's greater Son: **the Star of Jacob and the scepter from Israel** came to the world—came to us—and turned on the floodlights of forgiveness and faith.

We don't need Balaam to tell us this. He said nothing in his fourth message that that prophets and the apostles haven't told us. He saw a light he could not see it clearly. We see a light whose brightness and brilliance we know. We have Jesus; we don't need this loser Balaam. But...

In the early years of Christianity, when believers were being persecuted, they lived in caves or catacombs. They often covered the walls of the catacombs with Christian symbols and drawings of biblical events. You can still see them today as a tourist. There is an interesting drawing found in several of the catacombs. It depicts Mary holding the child Jesus with three men facing them holding gifts in their hands. A star shines above them. Obviously, it's the Magi presenting their gifts to Jesus, right? Can you guess who is standing behind Mary and Jesus and pointing to the star? Yes, that's Balaam! Remember the Magi's words to King Herod when they arrived in Jerusalem? **Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.** How did the Magi know about a king in Israel or a star that would announce his birth? Did they know these words: **I see him, but not now; I behold him but not near. A Star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will arise out of Israel.** Did Balaam the loser bring the light of the world to the Magi?

Of course, we'll never know. The Magi may never have heard of Balaam; the Lord may have spoken to the Magi directly or in a vision or a dream. But here's the point: At least some Christians believed that the Lord used

Balaam to point the Magi to Jesus. A cheat and a scoundrel, a loser by any definition but they rejoiced to remember that **the Lord uses losers to bring light to the world.**

Caesar Augustus was a tyrant and a pagan and he was a loser to God. But the decades of peace he brought to the Roman empire and the roads he built enabled Christians to travel from Persia to England with the light of Christ. Thomas Jefferson denied all the miracles of Jesus including the resurrection and he was a loser to God. But his constitutional insistence on freedom of religion enables us to enjoy the light of Christ in peace and security. Frederick William III forced German Lutherans to compromise and deny Luther's teachings and was a loser in the sight of God. But his laws drove thousands of Lutherans out of Germany and some of them settled in Freistadt (and taught many of us the light of Christ.) (St. John's Congregation was founded by a pastor from Freistadt.) Ho Chi Mien was a Communist who was responsible for the deaths of thousands of soldiers and drove America out of Vietnam; he was a loser to God. But today in his capital city of Saigon stands a Lutheran seminary that trains pastors who proclaim the light of Christ.

Epiphany is often called "Christmas of the Gentiles." The visit of the Magi began the Gentile journey to the light of Christ and all our families have all marched in that journey—we are all Gentiles. In the 2,000 years that have passed, Christian pastors, missionaries, and laypeople have brought that light to millions and millions of people all over the world. We pray for more pastors and teachers who can go in our place. We pray for peace so they can go with safety. We pray for money so we can support them. We pray for courage to witness to family and friends. But in the end God still holds the spread of the gospel in his hands. Herod wanted to kill the newborn king, but he still sent the Magi to Bethlehem where they found and worshiped the newborn king. Foreign wars won't stop the gospel, national wickedness won't stop the gospel, incompetent politicians won't stop the gospel, not even the gates of hell will stop the gospel. In fact, **Sometimes the Lord uses losers to bring light to the world.** Amen.

This sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.