

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Numbers 24:15-19 ¹⁵*Balaam took up his oracle and said: The declaration of Balaam son of Beor, the declaration of the man whose eye is open,* ¹⁶*the declaration of the one who hears the words of God, who receives knowledge from the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who is falling down, but his eyes are wide open:* ¹⁷*I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise up out of Israel. It will smash the foreheads of Moab and the skulls of all the people of Sheth.* ¹⁸*Edom will lose its territory to others. Seir, Israel's enemy, also will become a possession, but Israel will display its power.* ¹⁹*One who comes from Jacob will rule, and he will destroy the survivors of the city.* (EHV)

Follow the Star who is, who was, and who is coming.

Dear friends in Christ,

You have a star engraved above the entrance of the church that represents the star of Bethlehem, the star that lit up the night sky some two thousand years ago calling to all people that the Savior coming into the world was coming not just to help the tribes of Israel, but He was a true King coming to rescue people just like you and me. Just about a month from today, we will remember and celebrate those wise men who travelled from far east of Bethlehem to meet a newborn King who would bring so much promise to the world.

It is thought that the Scripture before us is the prophecy that motivated those wise men when they went searching for Jesus. As we remember the Bethlehem star, it is necessary that we understand that the reason for its being engraved in stone before you, and the reason this congregation has gathered around the Scriptures for 150 years, is the Light who was coming into the world to remove all darkness. The message for us is to **Follow the Star who is, who was, and who is coming.**

It is undeniable that Balaam was anything but a faithful prophet, for though he knew of God, he agreed to be hired by an enemy ruler to curse God's chosen people. However, God intended to bless the Children of Israel. Therefore, all the words God put into the prophet's mouth spoke of victory over the enemies of the people God loves. Balaam acknowledged that the words he spoke were not his own. Rather, this prophecy came directly from the One true God. Therefore, the prophecy is true because God is ever true. Furthermore, there is a timelessness to the prophecy. Balaam said, *"I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near."* In his trance-like-state, Balaam was seeing the Lord Himself but in a future place and time.

Our Lord has declared, *"Certainly I, the Lord, do not change. That is why you, sons of Jacob, have not come to an end."* (Malachi 3:6) The nation of Israel was incredibly fickle in its relationship with the Lord. Far too often that people questioned God's leadership and succumbed to the temptations of foreign idols. We too must likewise confess that our allegiance to the Lord and our dedication to doing God's will often wavers. As sinners born in the image of our fathers, we enter the world fighting against God—a battle that often rages within us still today. Yet, our Lord remains ever faithful to His promises and true to His Word.

My friends, we praise God because it is His Word of grace that led us to believe in His Son as our Savior and Redeemer. God says, *"My word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty. Rather, it will accomplish whatever I please, and it will succeed in the purpose for which I sent it."* (Isaiah 55:11) It is God's faithfulness that sent His Son to enter this world as a human infant, to experience the poverty of the human condition, and the frailty of our existence. With His own human eyes, God's Son saw the troubles we endure, the temptations thrown against us, and the sorrows and pains of being alienated from God. The writer to the Hebrews said, *"Although he was the Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered."* (Hebrews 5:8) Jesus suffered because He was living on earth for you and me.

Here, Balaam foretold, *"A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise up out of Israel. It will smash the foreheads of Moab and the skulls of all the people of Sheth."* Many people likely assume this foretold a king like David who conquered Israel's enemies at will. The wise men from the east, however, recognized that the true King was something more. Regardless of whether those wise men from the east

had the whole Old Testament available to them, or just the five books of Moses, they came to Israel's capital city longing to meet this promised King who would conquer Israel's enemies for good, because they understood that the Bethlehem star was leading them to the true fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy. Likewise, St. Peter instructs us, *"We also have the completely reliable prophetic word. You do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts."* (2 Peter 1:19) Thus, we **Follow the Star who is, who was, and who is coming.**

In the writings of Isaiah, we listen in to God informing His Son of His salvation plan, for He said, *"I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth."* (Isaiah 49:6) In the same vein, Jesus told His disciples, *"I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12)

The first time Jesus arrived on earth, He came to live in humility and weakness. He didn't publicly demonstrate His true status as the Son of God who holds all the power and authority of heaven and earth. That is because Jesus was here for the express purpose of living a perfect life in our place. Therefore, Jesus lived through what we experience, yet He remained without sin. Jesus showed enough power over earthly things that the people should have recognized His divine nature, but it was hidden so well that most thought of Him as only a man. In the end, Jesus was rejected by everyone, because He didn't look like a victorious King. Yet, this too was His Father's plan.

Jesus took on human flesh to live and die on our behalf. His perfect obedience fulfilled all law and the whole will of His Father in heaven—for us. Then, as the Scriptures had long foretold, *"God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him."* (2 Corinthians 5:21) Carrying all the sins of the world, the One true Light, the Son of God, and the only truly holy Man who has ever lived, was nailed to the cross of shame as the payment price that set us free from death and condemnation.

It boggles the sinner's mind that this abused, stripped, mocked, bleeding Jesus could be anything more than the rebel He was accused of being. Yet, Pilate knew Jesus was a King, and the disciples who had abandoned Jesus also knew it. But, there hung Jesus, bleeding on a cross, alone, rejected even by the Father in heaven, because of our sins. Yet, this is not something to be mourned, for this had been God's plan from the beginning.

It was God's plan when He put the words in Balaam's mouth that foretold the coming King of Light. And, God's plan did not include Jesus staying dead. Instead, Jesus rose from the grave Easter morning, as you all well know. There, on Easter morning, we see the victory of our King. There, we see Jesus crush the wicked foe who led Adam and Eve to sin, crushing the head of the devil who has accused and tormented us all ever since. As Balaam unwillingly foretold, the enemies of God's people have been crushed by the Morning Star, the glorious One who came to win the victory for all who believe in the Savior who is David's son and David's Lord.

For one hundred fifty years, this congregation has been following the Star who is *the Light of the World*. Generation after generation has handed down the truth to their children that Jesus is the King of God's chosen people, that He is the Star of Jacob, and the ruler of heaven and earth. You have rightly taught that Jesus is the true Son of God and (as He often referred to Himself) the true Son of Man through His birth-mother Mary. Furthermore, with the faith in Jesus worked in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, we trust Jesus' promise, *"Surely I am with you always until the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20) Therefore, Jesus always was, and He always is, yet He also is still coming.

Balaam prophesied, *"Israel will display its power. One who comes from Jacob will rule, and he will destroy the survivors of the city."* In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul asked rhetorically, *"Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we will judge angels?"* (1 Corinthians 6:2-3) At the judgment, the saints will testify against those who have never believed in Jesus. We testify against them already by our faith in Jesus as God's Son and true Savior of the world. Every worship service and every confession of faith is a testimony against Satan's forces.

In the greeting of the Revelation, St. John gives glory to Jesus as he says, *"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his own blood and made us a kingdom and priests to God his Father—to*

him be the glory and the power forever. Amen. Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him. And all the nations of the earth will mourn because of him.”

(Revelation 1:5-7) Jesus came to save the world from sin and death. However, much of the world still rejects Him. There will be a reckoning for those who do not believe.

Jesus testified, *“The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, God’s wrath remains on him.”* (John 3:36) There is no salvation apart from faith in Christ Jesus. He is the bright morning Star who has brought light and life to the world. On the last day, Jesus will return—though this time to judge the world. He will separate the believers from the unbelievers, and those who have rejected Jesus, or have never known Him, will be cast to outer darkness, forever separated from the God of love, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:42)

On the other hand, for those who believe in Jesus, who have been washed in the waters of baptism and cleansed by the blood of Christ, there is hope, and this hope is not a wishful thinking, for Jesus has promised to take us to be with Him. Confident of this, St. Paul wrote, *“The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.”* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Dear friends, today we recognize one hundred fifty years of faithfully following the Lord of Light. At the same time, we are in Advent, a time in which we prepare to meet the King who once was born in a manger but now lives and reigns in heaven above. It is a time to encourage you with all hope that Jesus has done everything necessary to give you eternal life. He has taken away all your sins. He has destroyed all those enemies who seek your destruction. In baptism, Jesus has connected you to both His death and to His resurrection, while He also put over you His perfect righteousness making you perfectly acceptable to His Father in heaven.

It has been over twenty years since I have been able to worship with you on a regular basis. The day is coming when we will be gathered together with our Lord Jesus to sing with the holy angels and all the saints of all generations, all gathered together around the throne of the Lamb of God who was slain. Jesus shed His blood for you and me. Here, in this place, Jesus regularly gives you His real human body and blood as evidence that His sacrifice has set you free—it is real medicine that sets you free from sin, free from fear, free from Satan’s control, and free to live and walk with your Savior, both now and in eternity. Beloved children of the heavenly Father, **Follow the Star who is, who was, and who is coming.** Amen.

Now the God of hope fill you with complete joy and peace as you continue to believe, so that you overflow with hope in Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.