

The Epiphany of Our Lord
Year C
Matthew 2:1-12
“Worship Christ”

Goal: That the hearers would be comforted and strengthened by the knowledge that the Lord sets them as lights to the world.

Today is Epiphany. The Christmas season is officially over. Epiphany comes from two Greek words that can be translated as “to shine upon,” “to reveal,” or “to appear, manifest.” What makes Epiphany so special is this: it is the time when God chose to reveal Himself—not just to a chosen few—but to **all** nations.

God is revealing Himself as One, who will not only judge all in the end, but who also has a plan for our lives. Because He loves us, and because He knew that we needed forgiveness and salvation, this one God sent His only Son to save us. Today, we will consider how people have responded to the Epiphany star.

(Pause) Matthew begins: “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him”” (2:1-2).

Who were these “Wise Men?” Scripture doesn’t call them kings, nor does it say there were three. We picture that number because of the three gifts brought to the Christ Child. By calling them “Wise Men,” I don’t mean they had answers to everything. Maybe they thirsted for knowledge or were stargazers who tried to understand events by watching the sky.

Another thing about these Wise Men: They were far away from God’s kingdom. They likely lived hundreds of miles to the east of the Holy Land. They probably had little training in the Bible. Apparently they’d heard about how the Jews longed for a Messiah—perhaps

from Numbers 24:17, a prophecy of a king and a star—but possibly they didn't know too much more than that.

The Lord showed them a special star in the east. Maybe they didn't know much. Maybe the details weren't clear. Though there were unanswered questions, they didn't just sit there. They set out on a trip that could take months. It cost them money. It meant inconveniencing themselves away from normal work and commitments. But all of this seemed fine to them. They yearned to get close to the One born king of the Jews. Even after they had passed through Jerusalem, when they saw the star again on the final leg of their trip—they, if I may paraphrase the old Greek Bible—“rejoiced with a whopping big joy” (2:10)!

All of this is phenomenal. Wise Men, far from the kingdom, perhaps with little of God's Word, receiving a bit of prompting and the sight of a star, make it into “Priority No. 1” to get close to the newborn king. Matthew 2:11, “And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

(Pause) When these guys showed up in Jerusalem and told the Jews they'd seen a miracle star pointing to the birth of the Messiah, you'd think those believers would be beside themselves with gladness. Matthew tells us that it didn't go like that. The star that was such glad news to these pagans from the east turned out to be upsetting news for Jerusalem.

Why? Why does Matthew 2:3 say, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him”? You've heard of the Herods. They could be a bloodthirsty bunch. When this Herod heard of this star, he didn't think of God's promised Savior, the

salvation of his soul, and what a good thing this would be for his people. Instead, he thought, “This is a threat to my throne. This threat must be put down and with force if necessary.”

Herod was a spiritual fake. Listen to his scheming. Matthew 2:7-8, “Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.’”

He summons the Wise Men, not openly, but secretly, to calculate when the star appeared. He sends them off to Bethlehem to check this out. He lies about his intentions. He makes it sound as if he wanted to go himself to kneel before this Child. But murder was in his heart the whole time.

Herod wasn't alone in being upset by the star. Hear again in Matthew 2:3, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” All people were upset. Why? They knew how terrible Herod was. If he felt threatened and his sword starts swinging, there's no telling who could be cut down.

When Herod convenes the Bible scholars and asks where the king was to be born, these spiritual leaders had an opportunity. They knew it was predicted for Bethlehem, just six miles down the road. They could have said, “Brothers and sisters, this is what we've waited for! Let's hurry along with these Wise Men! They've come hundreds of miles; surely we can walk the last six with them!”

But no! These people who know Scripture and are totally familiar with God's promises take little interest. No excitement. No awe. No wonderment. They don't encourage other people either. Let's just sit tight. Let's hope it blows over.

There you see it: a group of born pagans who know little of the true God drop everything and undertake a grueling journey to get close to the newborn king of the Jews. Meanwhile, God's own chosen people with years of Bible teaching, living just a nice walk down the road from Bethlehem, sit there. They don't seem interested in what the Lord of mercy has placed in their own neighborhood.

You realized that God got His way, even if people did respond poorly. Even if Herod plotted and snuffed out the lives of many baby boys in Bethlehem in his attempt to kill Jesus, God got His way. He shielded His Son. He moved His kingdom forward.

(Pause) Do you grasp what's happening here at Epiphany? The star makes a point—God will get His way with you or without you. The Epiphany star asks you a clear question: “Is it a star of wonder for you? How are you responding to this Christ, the great Christmas gift from God? Is it in wonderment, faith, and joy....or not?”

In many ways, we're not always so different from those Jerusalem people. You've had incredible spiritual blessings here, years of Bible teaching and preaching in our church family. But you and I have the old sinful nature working down inside us. We're not really better than the Jerusalem folks who didn't care much when the Wise Men arrived all excited about the newborn king.

We can reach the sad point where we shrug off the urgency of drawing near to the Christ Child because, after all, “we already know that stuff!” Thus the evil one can take a great spiritual heritage and turn it into poison, because we may say a shallow “Yes” to the Christmas message without embracing it with the gladness, the wonder, of a child.

We've just crossed into a new year. That fact should fill us with two thoughts especially: First, to thank God for all His kindness in the past. Second, each new year can

remind you that time is ticking away. You're coming that much closer to the end of all things, or to the end of your personal life, whichever comes first.

So, how do you plan to spend 2019 in your life as God's child? The Wise Men had to travel hundreds of miles to get to Christ. You don't have to do anything like that. You've got cars. You've got alarm clocks to wake you up plenty in time for church. You see, you've got Bethlehem right here in our church, whenever the saving news of Jesus is sounded. He is your Lord and Savior—crucified on the Cross for your sins and bodily raised on the Third Day for your forgiveness, life and salvation.

Whenever the Holy Sacraments are offered as Jesus gave them to us, be here to receive His good gifts. In Word and Sacrament you have the Christ Child—giving Himself and the free pardon of your sins. Your sins are all covered over and blotted out of God's memory by the blood of your Savior.

(Pause) Set before you this year the attitude of the Wise Men: what a privilege it is to worship the newborn King! What joy that He wipes your slate clean by His pardoning and forgiving blood. What wonder that He makes you to be His child through the redeeming waters of your Baptism. What grace He sets before you at His Table so that you might be fed now and eternally.

What a privilege to give back to Him a percentage of what He first blesses you with in life. What a privilege you have to share in word and deed this light of Christ with others that surround in life.

Respond to the "star of wonder, star of night" with this joyful attitude. May the days of 2019—as many as you get—find you doing so! Amen.