

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

Matthew 2:1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 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.”

How many wise men were there? Good question. I know how many most assume there were, but the Bible doesn't tell us, does it? Why do many assume there were three? Three gifts are listed later. The truth is, however, this could have been a much larger group than most consider it.

Where in the east did they come from? That we also don't know, but most likely Persia, Babylon, or Arabia, somewhere with the sophistication that would fund and appreciate their scholarly activities. That they were familiar with the land and religion of Israel, might indicate that they came from Babylon, where Jewish history and prophecy could well have been handed down among learned people after Daniel's influential service there.

Who do they seek? They seek the king of the Jews, and so they come to the capital of the Jews, to Jerusalem, surely expecting to find great pomp and circumstance, to find a child richly adorned and doted upon. They were in for a rude awakening, though. The Jesus they'd imagined would be completely different from the Jesus of reality, of the Word.

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

Why was Herod troubled? He smelled a rival, and he had little tolerance for rivals.

Why was all Jerusalem troubled with him? They knew that a rival king meant bloodshed, because Herod was a murderous tyrant. In fact, Augustus, the Roman emperor, once said that he would rather be Herod's pig than his dog. Herod killed at least three of his own sons when he thought they threatened his reign. Why would he think twice about killing what appeared to be the son of some two-bit carpenter? The Jews were proven correct in their fear, because Herod gives us the holy innocents, innocent infants and toddler soon slaughtered for fear that they might be the newborn king, a rival. But Herod really didn't have anything to fear. As Jesus Himself would later tell Pilate, another earthly ruler, His kingdom is not of this world. No, he rules in human hearts through faith and eternally in heaven.

4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

***6 “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”***

What a gift the Word of God is! Notice, the star was useful, as is the natural law, but only the Word could get the wise men to Bethlehem, to the Savior. The Word is clear. There was no doubting where God's promise would be fulfilled. The religious leaders of the day didn't have to start a task force or undertake a yearlong study. The answer was no further than their Bibles. Christ would be born in Bethlehem.

And, behold, the Christ had been born in Bethlehem, but we don't see these religious leaders on the road to Him with the wise men, do we? Knowing the Word is only half the battle. We must learn the Word and put it into practice. We must apply it. We must take it in our hands and also into our hearts. If faith were mere head knowledge, these priests and scribes would have been fine, but faith is not mere head knowledge, but trust, and trust would have set their feet in motion alongside the gentile wise men to welcome the newborn king.

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 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.”

What leads the wise men to Jesus? Scripture. What does Herod seek to use to find and destroy Jesus? Scripture. Why do the wise men want to find Jesus? Worship. What does Herod claim as his goal in finding Jesus? Worship. Even the devil knows Scripture. Even the devil can plan a worship service. Why, though? To what end? When we gather around, teach, and preach the Word, our end goal or motivation must never be self-serving. Yet that is what it often is when we expect the Bible and worship to please us, instead of giving us the Christ who makes us pleasing to God, or when people pick and choose from the Bible and arrange worship to remake God in their image instead of being remade in His.

A pastor with a Bible and a building with a steeple do not make a church. No, God’s Word clearly taught and applied, people seeking the Christ as He is and not as they want Him, that is what a church is called to be. Yes, even as longtime Christians, the old Adam still hangs around our neck, and we often come for the wrong reasons, and yes, even want to hear the wrong things, but the church does not and must never exist to serve those wrong reasons and things, but to correct them and to supply the balm and aid we actually need most, a Savior from sin for Jew and Gentile, man, woman, and child all the same, for me.

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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 and frankincense and myrrh.

The Light of the World was resting under the light of His star, and when the wise men found Him, they rejoiced. They didn’t shrug, or stick their nose in their hymnal, or go through the motions. No, their heart was in this encounter with Christ. They knew what they had found when they had found Jesus: forgiveness, life, and salvation. And so they **“rejoiced exceedingly with great joy,”** and hurried into God’s house.

I didn’t see your faces in the parking lot today, so you’ll have to tell me whether you looked like the wise men, like those who recognized their need, their desperate situation, their utter poverty before God no matter how many treasures rested in their coffers? You’ll have to tell me if you looked like those ready to hit the deck in worship, unworthy to stand before the God Child, to look Him in the eye, let alone have Him lift you up, as we know from the Bible He longs to do for the humble and repentant. Was the joy of the wise men your own?

The wise men hurried to meet Him and they brought Him their best: gold for a King; frankincense, a symbol for prayer, for a Priest; and myrrh, burial ointment, for the greatest of the prophets, the Savior who would offer the supreme sacrifice, Himself, for their sins.

What have our gifts confessed about our faith? What does how we’ve used our time, our talents, our treasures—all gifts from God—convey about our attitude toward God? What does what we’ve offered Him in our daily lives confess about the nature of our faith in Him, whether we are the chief priests with packed heads and empty hearts, or the wise men who fostered a healthy connection between the two, the head and the heart? The wise men surely were surprised and troubled by how unimportant Jesus seemed to the Jews, His first people. Have we perhaps become stumbling blocks rather than avenues for the conversion of others, causing them to wonder why Jesus should matter for their lives if He doesn’t seem to matter much for ours? Is “Christian” or “Lutheran” a word on your Facebook profile or an accurate description of who you are?

12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

While so many at the time did not recognize the importance of this Child and their life-and-death need for His subsequent ministry, death, and resurrection, though still today we often fail to recognize the same and take Him for granted, the heavenly Father knew we could not afford to lose Him, and in the same love that led Him to give Jesus to us in Bethlehem, He continued to protect the Christ Child.

Summary

The wise men hurried to Jesus because they recognized their need for Him. Recognize your need for Him. So long as you have sin you have need for forgiveness and God's forgiveness is found nowhere else but in this Child. And you need not fret that you might not find Him. He is where He has always been: in His Word—the same Word that led the wise men to Bethlehem.

What the wise men got from that Word was not the Jesus they'd at first imagined, but rather the Jesus they needed, the Jesus God the Father had actually begotten and sent, and that is the same Jesus we will find in Scripture—not the Jesus we've imagined necessarily, but the Jesus we need, the Jesus God has given for us and to live in us, and there's no better Jesus to be had.

And that Jesus is not only for us, but for all. On this "Gentile Christmas," as it has been called, when we see that God has sent His Son for the forgiveness and eternal life of all nations, of all who will seek Him and receive Him through faith, and not just the Jews, we are spurred on in our efforts as a synod. We support ministerial education, schools to train future pastors, teachers, and educated laymen, so that people will be equipped to share with others Scripture's promises and revelations about Jesus. And we also support home and world missions, because when we treasure this Christ Child, and when we realize that His gifts are not only for us but for all, we cannot help but strive to announce that news to as many as possible, whoever they might be, wherever they might be, yes, in our daily lives among the people we have contact with, but also as a body of believers sending men where we ourselves do not have contact with people and are unable or untrained to go.

Jesus came to His own, and as John reminded us on Christmas Day, His own did not receive Him. What a tragedy! What a sad commentary on their lack of trust to match their knowledge! May God keep us from the same mistake and downfall! This Jesus is your Jesus. This Jesus is your forgiveness, life, and salvation, whoever you are, whatever you have done. His Word leaves no doubt about that, and through His Word you have a clear sign where to find Him. Hurry into His house. Hurry in to meet Him. And, when you do, when you pair your knowledge learned through the Word with faith worked through it, make no mistake about it: He into whose house you hurry, who was humble enough to be born in a stable and rest in a manger, will not think it beneath Him to make your heart His home. Amen.