

Epiphany 1
January 8, 2017

“Wise Men Come from Afar to Worship Jesus”

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 have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ⁶ 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' " ⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." ⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

During our Christmas celebration we had a nativity scene in the front of our church. There were shepherds, Mary and Joseph, an angel and the baby Jesus clustered together in front of the altar. The wise men were positioned in the back of the altar to show that they came to worship Jesus at a time that was different from that of the shepherds.

In fact there is quite a contrast between the shepherds who worshiped Jesus and the wise men who came later. The shepherds lived close to where Jesus was born. The wise men came from far away, perhaps as much as a thousand miles away. The shepherds were Jewish people. The wise men were Gentiles who came from the East. The shepherds were poor and had little education. The wise men were highly educated and they were rich. The shepherd saw an angel in the sky that directed them to Jesus. The wise men saw a star. As different as they were, they had this in common, both groups of people knelt down and worshiped Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

During this Epiphany season we celebrate how our God of grace and mercy is bringing people from all over the world to worship Jesus as their Lord and God and Savior. Let's see how the wise men come from afar to worship Jesus.

"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, saying, "Where is He who has been born King

of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." These wise men came from the East. They are also called Magi from the Greek word "magos." This same word is used in Acts to describe a man named Elymas who was a sorcerer. In Daniel chapter 2 we read that Daniel was placed in charge of the king's wise men. They may have been learned people who dabbled in sorcerer, astrology, astronomy and science. In a sermon on this text Martin Luther compares them to university teachers of his day caught up with the teachings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He said, "For the universities also claim they teach natural arts which they call philosophy while in reality they are teaching not only tomfoolery, but also poisonous error and idle dreams."

These magi came from the east. This was a land of darkness where there was a lack of understanding and knowledge of the true God. Romans 1 says of people living in darkness: "Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." Into this darkness and unbelief the Lord God found a way to bring the light of his love into their lives. Did they know about Daniel and the others who were captives in Babylon five hundred years earlier? Were they familiar with a promise in the Old Testament that said, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel... A ruler will come out of Jacob?" Romans 10 says of the gospel message, "Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

They came to Jerusalem looking for the one who was born as king of the Jews. The star they had seen in the sky somehow announced to them that this King was born who was more than just someone to admire but someone to worship as their Lord and God. Stars are important because they give glory to God. They serve to mark the seasons and times of the year. This special star did more than give glory to God, it announced the birth of Jesus. The shepherds heard of Jesus' birth from an angel. The wise men heard of Jesus' birth from a star.

What amazes us about these wise men is their determination to find this baby and worship him. They said so clearly and with such conviction, "We have come to worship him." They came to Jerusalem from the East, from the Persian Empire, which was a bitter enemy of Rome. What a risk it was to travel hundreds of miles into enemy territory, walk through the streets of Jerusalem where Roman soldiers were present and interface with wicked King Herod. This Christmas and throughout your life you kneel and worship Jesus as your Lord and God. If someone threatened to put you to death for claiming Jesus is Lord and God, you would boldly confess him. That is the miracle of God's grace that came into the lives of these wise men and has also come into your life as well.

In contrast to the wise men who wanted to worship Jesus, we have King Herod who will do everything in his power to find a way to put Jesus to death. "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod should have known better. It was Herod who built the temple in Jerusalem that took forty six years to build. Everything in that temple revolved around sacrifices that pointed to the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world. He heard the Jewish people talking about a Messiah who would someday rule the world. This man was evil. He hated what he heard from the wise men. He even deceitfully asked them when the star appeared so that he could determine kill all the baby boys born in Bethlehem around that time.

This past week I was visiting a man who served our country in WW2. He had received a

card, a Christmas card, from the family of a friend from WW2 who had died this past year. He showed the front cover of the card with its picture of cute animals and a warm cozy village in the back ground. There are always these cards at Christmas that are totally devoid of the Savior's birth. There are hearts that refuse to want anything to do with Jesus. I could be Herod. You could be Herod. That's how we were born into this world. Then God's grace rescued us just as God's grace rescued these wise men and brought them to point where they were willing to risk their lives to worship Jesus.

It was King Herod who called the priests and scholars in Jerusalem to ask them where the Christ was to be born. Herod even asks about the Messiah, the Christ, and the place of his birth. His evil, sin-blackened heart wants nothing to do with this Messiah. The priests and scholars know exactly where the Messiah was to be born. "So they said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' " Later when Jesus was preaching and teaching people said he could not be the Messiah because he was from Nazareth. They knew the prophecy. But they did not know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just as the Scriptures said.

Let the fulfillment of these prophecies convince you beyond any doubt that every word of the Bible is true. "Holy men of God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

First it was the star that appeared in the East, then it was the clear prophecy of the Old Testament that said the ruler from of old would be born in Bethlehem, and now the star appears again. "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

Truly this was an amazing star that the Lord provided for them. It led them to the very house where Jesus was with his parents Mary and Joseph. Notice it says clearly that they were staying in a house at this time. They were overjoyed. They experienced the same joy the shepherds experienced as they hurried to Bethlehem to see the new born Savior of the world. The shepherds had the word of God's angel give them the sign they would find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. The wise men had the Word of God and the star to direct them to the very house where the baby Jesus was.

And what do they do when they come into the house? "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, and of incense and of myrrh." It says that they bowed down and worshipped him. The word for bowing down has the meaning of falling down. They feel on their knees. They worshipped Jesus as their Lord and God. Once again Mary would have an opportunity to tell these wise men what she probably told the shepherds regarding what the angel said to her. "He will be great and called the Son of the Most High." She could tell them his name was Jesus because he is the Savior of the world.

The wise men do not have to reach into their pockets to find a few coins they can give to Jesus their King. They have come prepared. They open up their treasures, the treasures

they have carefully brought with them to worship Jesus. Oh what a blessing it is to worship Jesus throughout this coming year and to carefully plan to bring our treasures to him. Think of how valuable these treasures would be for the flight down to Egypt. Think of how valuable your treasures are to help other people like these wise men to learn about Jesus.

The wise men were overjoyed when they saw the star directing them to the house where Jesus was staying. The Greek words used here a doubling of superlative expressions of joy. A literal translation would be, "They exceedingly rejoiced with great joy." They anticipated worshiping their Lord and God and it filled them with great joy. 2017 is going to be another great year for us here in this congregation, Star of Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Like the wise men we can look forward to another year to worship Jesus as our Lord and God and it fills us with great joy. We will come before our God and confess our sins as we do every week. Then we will hear how our Lord and God was born into this world is the one who saves us and rescues. His name is Jesus. In the midst of the worst days of our life, there will be God's Word and his Sacrament and our Baptism to bring us close to Jesus. We are privileged to gather together and to kneel before our Lord and Savior and exceedingly rejoice with great joy. God's mercy and grace have brought you from afar, but now you are kneeling with the wise men and worshipping Jesus your King of kings and Lord of lords. This is a very special place to be. Amen.