

January 6, 2013
Epiphany

"Follow the Star to Bethlehem"

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.

What is an epiphany? Google this question and you might receive an answer such as this: "An epiphany could be finding out some sort of truth leading to a total change in thought." The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek and means to "shine" or "show forth."

The magi or Wise Men who came to Bethlehem had their ultimate epiphany when they saw the baby Jesus and worshipped him as their Lord and Savior. Their lives were changed forever. It was God's grace and mercy that led them out of the darkness into the light of his love for them in Jesus his Son.

As we face another year of life on this earth, we stand in awe of our God and his mercy which will lead people all over the world out of darkness into the light of his love. By Christmas 2013 there will be people worshipping in the manger in Bethlehem who never worshipped there before. To be sure, the year in front of us could have more disasters similar to hurricane Sandy, more shootings, more economic uncertainty and more unwanted changes for our personal lives. The Lord knows what the future holds and he also holds the future. He already knows how he is going to bring people to worship Jesus as their Lord and Savior just as he did with the wise men.

As we see these magi led by God's grace to worship Jesus, I ask you to think personally about God's grace and mercy that led you out of darkness into the light of his love. As you

see the star leading these people from the east to the very place where Jesus was, think of how often the Lord will lead you to see specifically and personally the depth of his love for you in Jesus his Son.

You have been led out of darkness

It is truly amazing how the Lord takes these people from the east who were living in darkness and then brings them to Jesus the light of the world. "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'" We don't know much about these magi. The Greek word used here is used in Acts to describe a man named Elymas who was a sorcerer. 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.

It is certainly not a stretch to say this light came from God's people living in Babylon who shared the Scriptures with them. In the ancient scrolls of the Old Testament they could read about a star that would come from Jacob. They could read about a child who would be born who would be the mighty God and everlasting Father. They could read about a king who would build a kingdom that would last forever based on his determination become a humble servant and take sin upon himself and be punished for sin and die and then rise from the dead. God's law has convicts them of their sin. They yearn and long for peace and forgiveness. They want to worship a child Isaiah called the Prince of Peace.

Wherever the light of God's love shine in people the darkness tries to overshadow the light. King Herod does not share the joy and enthusiasm of these wise men. He is deeply troubled. He gathers the priests and teachers of the law to ask them where the Christ was to be born. It doesn't take them very long to point out the words of the prophet Micah that predicted in great specificity that the ruler in Israel would come from the little town of Bethlehem. Herod even instructs the wise men to search for the child and tell him where he is so he can go and worship him also. Later he will kill the babies in Bethlehem in a futile attempt to do away with Jesus.

So we made it through another Christmas season where Santa Claus and celebrating and gifts became more important than the gift of God's Son born in Bethlehem. Satan is so good at marginalizing the true meaning of Jesus' birth. Jesus said in John 3, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

Dear Christian, never marginalize or think lightly of the miracle of God's grace that has

come into your life. You were once living in the land of darkness. Ephesians says "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Who knows what strange philosophies or tomfoolery might control our lives if it were not for the light of God's love that has shined in our hearts. For fifty years of her life, La Verne Shaw would not walk out the door of her home without consulting her horoscope. Then the Lord her God led her to worship Jesus, the baby Jesus, as her Lord and God. The preaching of the cross of Christ and the blessings of manger in Bethlehem would all be nonsense and foolishness if it were not God's grace that led you to Bethlehem to worship Jesus as your Lord and God.

You are led by the Word

What a joy and epiphany it must have been for the wise men to hear that the prophet Micah predicted the great ruler would come from Bethlehem not Jerusalem. "But you Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who be the shepherd of my people Israel." What an epiphany and joy it is for us to read verses in the Old Testament that so clearly define our salvation for us and speak about Jesus.

In Handel's great *Messiah* certain verses of the Old Testament that point to Christ are highlighted with an amazing musical score. I think of the words of Isaiah 53: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried out sorrows." Over and over the choir repeats the word "Surely" underscoring the completeness of our salvation in Christ. Affectionately the book of Isaiah has been called the 5th Gospel because it speaks so much about Christ. Think of all the great epiphanies the Lord has planned for you as he opens your eyes to see things about Jesus predicted long before they happened.

The wise men are further encouraged in their faith by the reappearance of the star that announced the Savior's birth to them. "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. 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 Lord knows how to bring joy into our lives when our tank is running on empty. He will not cause a star to suddenly appear for you on the horizon or even in your backyard. He will bring great joy in your life by reaching into your life with his Word to bring you closer to Jesus your Savior. Here is what it says about God's word in your life in 2 Peter 1. "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." You have something far better than a star to lead you to Jesus. You have his Word. The gracious God who gave the wise men this special star has already planned the special moments to reach you with his Word as you gather for worship, sing hymns, and especially read the Bible on your own. He will send you his Comforter who will teach you and then bring things to your memory.

You are led to worship

The wise men do not have to be told what to do when they enter the room where Mary is holding the baby Jesus in her loving arms. "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 worshiped him. They have been led by God's grace and mercy to believe that this tiny baby is their Lord and God. Think of the joy that Mary must have had as she watched them worship her Son as Lord and God. They came to her with the same message the shepherds received on the fields of Bethlehem. These are not Jews. They are Gentiles, people from strange lands with different types of clothing and different ways of speaking. Like Mary and Joseph, they believed with all their hearts that Jesus is their Lord and God and Savior. You can almost hear Mary softly say, "This is Jesus!" You can almost hear the wise men joyfully say the name for their first time that means so much to us today, "Jesus."

We don't know what tragedies may come to our nation in this new year or what problems may come to us personally or to people we love. We do know that our loving God who led the wise men to worship Jesus and call on his name is already planning those great moments of 2013 when we will gather in the name of Jesus to sing his praises and worship him and confess him and pray to him. How blessed you were to worship Jesus this past Christmas season. I often think of what Susan's dad would say to us, "Every day is Christmas!" Every day we join the wise men who were privileged to bow down and worshipped him. We are privileged to open our treasures and give him our best gifts out of love for bringing us out of the darkness and into the light. Some day we join these wise men and stand before Jesus along with all the saints and angels. In heaven we will praise him for all the blessings he has given to us. Amen.