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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
January 5, 2019
Epiphany Sunday

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:2-12
Hymns: 128; 129; 127; 97

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 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, ²saying, "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."

³When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴And 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.

⁵So 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.' "

⁷Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸And 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."

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹And 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.

¹²Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our Savior King, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Epiphany

Epiphany is a good word, even if it is not used so often in common conversation. It is used from time to time by people when they suddenly grasp the solution to a perplexing situation. One moment they feel confused and confounded, and then the solution comes to them, and they feel a brilliance that they didn't know before as the proper course of action or evident truth is brought to their minds.

Martin Luther understood the spiritual wonder of Epiphany for himself when he opened the Scriptures and finally understood the simple but incomprehensible truth of the gospel that "the just shall live by his faith." Luther knew the wonder of the brilliance of the gospel of Christ for the first time, and the dark foreboding of sin and death was dispelled forevermore.

That is the wonder of grace we celebrate each and every Christmas season. When we celebrate Christmas we celebrate the birth of our Savior! Today as we once again meditate upon the familiar account of the wise men

searching for the Child Jesus, may the Spirit lead us to a deeper appreciation of --

THEME: The Guiding Star as a Wonder of Grace.

I. The Star Reveals a Momentous Event -the Birth of the King!

We are correct in giving this account the significance it finds in our Christmas observance. One does not what a nativity set missing the wise men! It is so very important that we appreciate that the Holy Spirit is the one that has led us to understand that this is significant for us. It is especially significant for us because we are gentiles who believe in Jesus as the Lord and Savior. We don't think of this as strange that we are adopting the religion of some foreign nation. The Christian faith is the one true faith. How it happened that we the people of the gentile nations have come to be believers in Christ is a matter of grace, wondrous grace.

The opening of this news of the Savior's birth to the world was done with an act of God. **The star appeared!** Magi, or wise men, from some eastern nation observed this new star and were led by the Holy Spirit to an **epiphany**, a brilliant understanding that this star appeared as a mark of the coming of the Savior of the world, the birth of **their** Savior King! And so they followed the star.

Just that is beyond our ability to explain. They followed a star? How does one follow a star? Was it a heavenly light of a different kind that one could observe moving that they might follow it? So the Lord tells us in His Word, and so we believe. This was an act of God.

This was an act of God that marked the most momentous birth in the history of the world. Jesus was born. Jesus was born the King of the Jews! What the Holy Spirit would also lead us to notice is that God considered it important that

these wise men from the east found their way to Judea. Our text says:

Matthew 2:1-2 “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.”

Did you catch that word “**behold**?” The Spirit led Matthew to use that word several times throughout his account of Jesus’ life, and each time it is to mark a significant point. **Behold!** Wise men **from the east** came to Jerusalem.” This makes this event different from the Lord leading the shepherds to the stable where Jesus was born. The Lord led **foreigners** to come and search for Jesus, now a young Child, so that **they** could worship Him!

They came to Jerusalem assuming that all the people of the Jews would be celebrating the birth of the newborn King, and they weren’t finding that to be the case. Indeed it appeared that all were in ignorance of Jesus’ birth. That didn’t diminish the magnitude of the event. This was the most important birth in all history!

Of course the wise men expected everyone to be celebrating this birth. Look at how the whole world still lights up at the birth of prince or princess in England, and they are actually of diminished importance compared to the past, mere figureheads of state rather than true heads of state. Jesus was born King of the Jews, and that was an understatement of the Lord’s domain and power. His kingdom extends to the ends of the earth. Jesus’ kingdom would never end! And that was what the wise men were all about. They understood what the people of Israel and certainly King Herod would not and could not acknowledge, that Jesus the King of Kings and Lord of Lords had been born among them. This leads us to --

II. The Guiding Star and Its Connection to the Word

The wise men were certainly men of high prestige to be granted an audience with Herod the Great, one of the most powerful and influential rulers within the Roman Empire. But Herod, for all his wealth and all his influence with Rome was a man who was jealous of his power and position. When reports reached him that these men were making inquiries regarding one born to be King of the Jews, he was troubled. And when Herod was troubled, all Jerusalem was troubled right along with him. These men were brought before Herod after Herod had consulted the chief priests and scribes, the scholars of the Scriptures. They knew their Scriptures. They knew what Micah had foretold in his prophecy: *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.”* (Micah 5:2)

The One to be born Ruler in Israel would be born in Bethlehem, not far at all from Jerusalem. Herod met privately with the wise men, asking them to let him know when and where they found success in searching for this new-born King. Herod wanted them to believe that he also would honor and worship this new King, but only dark evil filled Herod’s heart. The light of God’s Word did not penetrate the darkness found there. The wise men went on their way toward Bethlehem, and the star appeared and they rejoiced as it led them to the home where the Christ-child was to be found.

Now let us consider the connection the Lord presents for us in these verses. The guiding star was a wondrous miracle of grace, but what of the information presented to them in the clear Word of God? The Word of the Lord is likewise *a marvel of God’s grace*. It accurately guides people wandering in the darkness of sin and death to the Savior, to that One who is Born King of the Jews.

Herod dismissed the truth found in the Scriptures, but then so did the chief priests and the scribes who really should have been keyed in to what these wise men were saying and how it correlated to the word of the prophet. They failed to take the Word to heart. The failing was not in the Word of God. The failing was in the hearts of men, in Herod, and also in the spiritual leaders of the Jews! There should have been a procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but there wasn't. There wasn't because people didn't take the Scriptures seriously.

The Scriptures guide us in the saving truth of God. The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Word incarnate. Yes, the guiding star is a marvel that we talk about when we consider how it stood over the house where the Christ-child was to be found, but it is no less a wonder of God's grace that we find our Savior revealed in His Word that leads us in all truth. Think of the wonder of God's grace that is as true for us as it was for Timothy. Paul wrote to Timothy; *"From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."* (2 Timothy 3:15-16)

In the greatness of His grace God has not only revealed the truth to you in His Word, but the Lord used His Word to guide you to Jesus, that you too might know Him as your Redeemer King.

Now may we learn from the wise men --

III. The Enlightened Heart's Response.

I say the enlightened heart's response because the response of the wise men was not a response from the natural heart of man. It was a response that flowed from faith, not sight. The star had not led them to a palace in Jerusalem. There they found a king, but for all his wealth

and power King Herod was not the one they had come to worship. They made their way to Bethlehem where the Lord through the guiding star directed the wise men to an ordinary looking house and an ordinary looking child living in lowly circumstances. These grand Magi did not turn away. They fell down before the Child Jesus and worshiped Him. Faith did not disdain the lowly circumstances but rather with hearts filled with devotion for the Redeemer King, these grand men of this world humbled themselves before Him who appeared in lowliness and poverty.

It is so important for us to note that they humbled themselves before the Lord. This came from faith not coercion. People today, especially Americans don't get this as being a significant part of our relationship with the Lord. They like to talk about Jesus being Lord, but then they want to live life as they please with little or no consideration of Jesus' proper place in their lives as their **Lord!** He is the One who was born to be OUR King. We sing, "*He rules the world with truth and grace.*" However, we live like **we** are the masters of our own lives, and pay little heed to the Lord Jesus.

Lesson one from the wise men for the enlightened heart's response: humble yourself before the Lord. They assumed the position of humility. They were literally face down on the ground before the mighty King! May we at least do so in heart **and** mind **and** life, submitting to the will of Him whose will is for our salvation!

Second, the wise men worshiped the Christ-child. This is big. They came all this way, taking a huge amount of their time for this moment to occur. They worshiped Jesus as their Redeemer King. So often people today don't think they need to come to church. They don't need to hear it all again. I'll debate that, but more to the point they are dismissing the place of worship in their lives. Yes, one may worship also at home or in the woods or on the lake, but do we? Really? More than a passing thought? Worship,

true devotion is due the Christ-child our King! He was born into this world to **save us**, to deliver us from death, and we know and believe that Jesus is the Christ **the Son of God**, and **our Redeemer!** And we don't have time to worship? It is a great lesson to learn from the wise men, to call to mind each and every time we see them in a manger scene or nativity set. Let it be more than a line in Christmas carol, "**Come and worship, Come and worship, Worship Christ our new-born King!**" May it be our dedicated way of life!

Finally, the wise men didn't come empty handed. They came bearing treasures worthy of a King. They presented those treasures to the Child Jesus. It didn't matter that they found Jesus in a simple working class house. They presented Jesus with treasures that would have been acceptable to King Herod as a worthy tribute to Herod's high position and royalty. They didn't present Jesus with a mere token gift. They didn't present Jesus with what was left of their resources. They didn't consider that they had done enough in searching Him out. They presented precious gifts that reflected their love and devotion of their Savior King. We don't know enough about these men to know their full monetary worth, but we know they didn't spare any expense in presenting an offering to the Lord. It was a gift from the depth of their hearts, hearts filled with faith and love for Christ, and the joy **and privilege** of coming before their Savior!

This also should serve us well as a lesson in offering our gifts to the Lord. May our offerings proceed from such love and devotion, from a pure appreciation of what we have been given in Jesus. May we present to Him gifts that come from such a heart. Then, be our offerings great or small, they will be gifts not only acceptable to the Lord but graciously received by Him.

Today we observe Epiphany! May we also praise God for guiding us to our Savior. May the example of the wise men

encourage us to serve our Lord with humility, devotion, and love.

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)