

5 January 2003
The Epiphany of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“The Real ‘Star’ of the Show!”

Text: Matthew 2:1-12 (Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

That Wise Men from the East came and worshipped the King of the Jews should not have been a surprise. The prophet Isaiah foretold that this would happen, as we heard in the Old Testament reading earlier. He spoke of the time when the sons and daughters of Israel would return from their exile, from their dispersment. He spoke of a radiant kingdom, to which nations and kings would come. He spoke about the dark days that would be no more. He spoke of the abundance and wealth of nations being brought to them, in tribute, as it was in the glory days of the kingdom, with Solomon the Wise on the throne. He spoke of those who would come from Sheba – the same place from which a queen had once come to see Solomon in all his splendor – and these visitors would bring with them gold and frankincense, rich and luxurious gifts. And, Isaiah says, these visitors **“shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.”** . . . Isaiah had laid it all out, some 700 years earlier.

So why was everyone surprised?

Didn't the Jews know of this prophecy of Isaiah? Oh they did – you can count on that! The Scribes and Pharisees in Israel were no dummies! They knew their Old Testament. And they would especially know about the prophecies that spoke of the restoration of the kingdom! And that is what they were looking for, and what they were waiting for. A Messiah that would come and restore the kingdom back to the good old days, the glory days, of David and Solomon!

So why were they so surprised?

Well, because they didn't expect it to happen yet! There was no kingdom, no glory, no king – nothing for anyone to come and visit and pay tribute to yet! They were still under the rule and control of the Romans, as the census that forced Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem certainly demonstrated. They were still under the rule and control of the tyrannical King Herod, who thought nothing of killing any and all who threatened his

power and his kingship. So yes, they were waiting for Isaiah's prophecy to come true . . . they were still waiting. And they saw no signs of it coming any time in the near future.

Perhaps that is why when these Wise Men go to Jerusalem and ask King Herod "***Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?***" the Chief Priests and Scribes do not tell Herod of the Isaiah prophecy or mention it – even though visitors from the East have come and brought gifts, as Isaiah had foretold. They instead turn to the prophet Micah, and send the Wise Men to tiny, humble Bethlehem. And the Wise Men go and continue their quest. And the star leads them to a humble house, and they find an infant – at some age between a newborn and a toddler. And though there is nothing regal or royal about the scene, nothing to suggest that this child is anything but another ordinary child, born in the normal way and the normal course of events – still they "***fell down and worshipped Him.***"

Are we surprised?

On the one hand, we should be. It is a scene that doesn't make sense by human standards. But on the other hand, we are not. Because we know that this is no ordinary birth, no ordinary child, and no ordinary visit. Everything about this birth, this child, this coming, is miraculous . . . including the appearance of the Wise Men and their worship of Jesus. The fact that they were wise was not the reason they were there. For all the wisdom in the world could not have convinced them to follow that star, to go to Bethlehem, and to fall on their knees before a child. No, this was all revealed to them by God. He chose them, He led them, and He gave them the wisdom *and the faith* to see that this child was no ordinary child, but in fact – *despite* of what their eyes and reason were telling them – that this child was the king, the king of the Jews, the Son of God, worthy not only of tribute and honor, but of worship.

And the same is true for you and I here today. We are not here because we are so wise, despite the catchy phrase you so often hear, that "*Wise men still seek Him.*" No, it is not our wisdom that has brought us here, it is the miraculous working of God. He chose us, He led us, and He gave us the wisdom *and the faith* to see that this child is no ordinary child, but in fact, our Saviour and King. And so we too fall on our knees and worship Him.

And so in reality, the "star of the show" today – pardon the pun! – is not the star in the sky, or even the Wise Men, which are the things we so often focus on, but really, the Word of God. For without that Word, and the Spirit of God who works through it, neither the Wise Men nor you and I would ever have found Jesus. He is "***the mystery made known by revelation,***" as St. Paul wrote in the Epistle this evening. Made known,

because the Father wants all to know His Son and of His salvation. He wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

And so how then did God make known this mystery to the Wise Men? Perhaps it was by the revelation God provided of His Word hundreds of years earlier that brought the Wise Men to Jerusalem. For did you ever wonder: why did they follow that star? Some scholars think the Wise Men, or Magi, were astrologers, and so studied the stars – and that’s fine. Perhaps true. But it still doesn’t answer the question of why they followed this star! It doesn’t seem like a very logical or *wise* thing to do. And so perhaps it was because of the Word of God that God caused to be brought to the East, to the Babylonians, when Israel was exiled to that place. You may remember that Daniel and his friends made quite a splash among the wise men there at that time, refusing to eat the royal food sacrificed to idols, and yet remaining healthier and stronger than those who did. Refusing to bow to the idol of the king, and yet being saved from the flames of the fiery furnace. Refusing to pray to the king, and yet being saved from the jaws of the lions. Being able to interpret the handwriting on the wall, when none of the Babylonian wise men could. Do you think these courageous men failed to speak and to preach of the reason for the hope and faith and strength that they had and so plant the seed of God’s Word? . . . And so perhaps it was one of the prophecies of hope from the Word of God, from the book of Numbers, that caused these Wise Men, generations later, to pick up and go to Israel. The Word of God which said, ***“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”*** And so upon seeing the star – which, did you notice, the Wise Men called not a star, but His star – they believe the Word and go to Israel.

But where in the country of Israel are they to go? What region? What city? Their *wisdom* tells them to go to the capital, to the palace. Common sense if you’re looking for a king, or the son of the king. But no – it is again God’s Word that must direct them and reveal to them where this king is, and it is not where you’d expect! Not in Jerusalem, but ***“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.”*** . . . And so believing the Word, they go to Bethlehem, again following the star, which had reappeared to them.

But then when they arrive in Bethlehem, there is one more journey they must make, and this one perhaps the most difficult of all. The journey to their knees. To believe that this child, in poor and lowly surroundings, which nobody else was worshipping, who had only his father and mother as attendants there caring for Him – to believe that this was the child they had come so far to see. The king, the king of the Jews. . . . This last journey no wise man could make. In fact, all their wisdom and knowledge and common

sense was telling them that this couldn't possibly be true! And yet the Word of God and the Holy Spirit working through it had done its work, and they not only fall on their knees in tribute and honor, but in worship.

And so too you and I. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit working through it has done its work in our hearts. All the wisdom and knowledge and common sense in the world could not have brought us here. In fact, the wisdom and knowledge of the world leads away from this place! Telling us not about a Creator, but to believe in evolution. Telling us not about our sin, but to believe in your inner goodness. Telling us to believe in the god and religion that best suits you and your tastes. Telling us to search for God through meditation, and to listen to Him through your inner voice. Telling us that if you do your best, surely God will accept you. Telling us that success is surely a sign of God's approval. But ever since the beginning, following the wisdom of the world has only led away from God. Just ask Adam and Eve.

And yet the Word of God and the Holy Spirit working through it has done its work, and so we are here today, falling on our knees in worship. Because the Word of God has told us that we did not evolve, but were created by our Father as the crown of His creation. And so we fall on our knees before our Creator. The Word of God has told us that we are not okay, that we have no inner goodness, but are sinners through and through. Sinners in need of a Saviour. And so we fall on our knees in repentance and receive His forgiveness. The Word of God has told us that there are not many gods and religions, but only one God, and one truth, and one Saviour. And so we fall on our knees to receive His salvation. The Word of God has told us not to expect glory or success or a victorious life because of our faith, but that as was with Jesus, the cross must come before glory; death before resurrection. And so we bear the crosses He has given us. And the Word of God has told us that if you want to find God your Saviour, and come before Him and receive His gifts, then you must go not where your wisdom tells you He must be, but where He has revealed Himself and where He has promised to be. And so we don't try to climb into Heaven, but instead fall on our knees, bow our heads, and open our ears and mouths . . . to be baptized by Him, to hear His voice, and to eat His body and drink His blood. For these humble means are His manger today. . . . And this is our worship. Not according to the wisdom of the world, but according to the Word of God. For the highest worship of God is not what we can do for Him or what we bring to Him, but to acknowledge Him and to receive His gifts.

And that is what the Wise Men did. Yes they gave Him gifts, as we do. But first they received Him, the Word made flesh, the greatest gift of all. They fell on their knees before Him, knowing that even the ability to do that was a gift given to them. A gift that all the wisdom in the world could not give them. . . . And so you and I. We're not here

because we are so wise, or because we have to be, and we don't repent because we have to – this is all His gift to us. The gift of His Word, the gift of His presence, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of death and resurrection, the gift of faith, the gift of His promises, the gift of ***“the mystery made known only by revelation.”*** For Epiphany is ultimately not just about the Wise Men – it is the story of how the Father, by the Spirit, reveals to us and leads us to Christ, His Son. That we and all people might come and adore Him who came to rescue us from the darkness of our sin. That was the working of God in the Wise Men, and it is His working in us still today.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen