

8 January 2017
The Epiphany of Our Lord (observed)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“He Wanted Them There; He Wants You Here”
Text: Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6

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

Scripture doesn't tell us their names.

We don't know where they were from. Just *from the east*. Does that mean Persia? India? The Orient?

We don't know how many there were. Three gifts suggest three visitors, but maybe *We Three Kings of Orient Are* isn't right at all.

And we don't know they were kings. Some think so, based on the words we heard from Isaiah today. The biblical word is *magus*; magi is the plural form. But what does that mean? Magician? Wise Man? Were Magi kings of some sort? Some think they were astronomers or astrologers, given their fascination with the star.

We don't know if they came together or separately, and just met up on the way or in Jerusalem.

We don't know exactly when they showed up. How old was Jesus? Was the family still where Jesus was born or somewhere else?

We don't know how they knew the star meant what they said - that this star was HIS star, the one *born king of the Jews*. Had they been taught that, to look for such a star, by Daniel or someone else long ago?

This story that we heard today, such a treasured part of the Christmas story, depicted in cards and carols and nativity scenes, we simply don't know much about. There are more questions than answers, it seems, when it comes to these mysterious visitors.

But this we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt: *God wanted them there*. God wanted them to be among the first to see His Son in human flesh.

And He wanted them there so much that He used some pretty extraordinary means to get them there. A star to guide them - first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. A wicked and paranoid king to point them to a town they never would have looked in. And chief priests

and scribes who would later, like Herod, not only try to kill this son, but succeed.

But so it happened. A most unlikely collusion. The angels who had announced this birth to Mary and to Joseph and to *the shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night* (Luke 2:8) had this one off. God used other means . . . and no less impressive, I would argue.

For He wanted them there. Who? Not just the Magi, whoever they were. *But Gentiles*. Folks who were not Jewish. He wanted rich and poor, high and low, Jews and Gentiles, there and worshipping His Son, who came to be not only the King of the Jews, but of all people.

And He wants you, too. And so He has brought you here.

And lest you think it not the same, I would say it is very much the same. For like the star, what thing or event in your life worked to bring you here? Like Herod, what unlikely person pointed you in this direction? Like the chief priests and scribes, who spoke the Word of God to you?

The apostle Paul says that he himself was one of those unlikely people God used to bring others to His Son. Paul - who hated Christ and Christians and the Church more than anyone, who couldn't persecute, imprison, and kill them fast enough - God used him to bring people to Jesus. Paul, who as we heard him say today, calls himself *the very least of all the saints*. God wanted him. God brought him. God used him.

And however He did it, God wanted you and brought you here as well. And He revealed to you your Saviour, that you too fall down and worship Him and receive gifts far more than you could ever bring Him. For while *gold, frankincense, and myrrh* have great value in our world, the gift this child has come to give has far greater value. Value for both this life and eternal life. For the gift He gives is Himself. To you.

And how remarkable, this gift that doesn't look like much of a gift. For what did the Wise Men see when they entered that house? No throne, no entourage, nothing to suggest royalty or specialness. What they saw was a baby or a child that looked just like any other baby or child, or perhaps a child even *poorer* than most and *less likely* to be a king. They could have looked at Him and said: *What? Who? That? Him?* No! Pardon us. We must have the wrong house.

But they believed the Word that had been spoken to them. Or better to say, the Word that had been spoken to them gave them the faith to believe. That yes, this child. Yes, *Him*. And they fell down and worshiped Him.

And how very much the same for us. For the gifts here, too, don't look very royal or special. For what do you see when you come here? Water that creates children of God?

Words that forgive sins? Bread and wine that carry the Body and Blood of Jesus? *This? Here? Really?* How easy to say: No! This cannot be right.

But the Word spoken to you gives you too the faith to believe. To fall down and worship not water, words, and bread and wine, but the One who comes to us in them as humbly as He came in the human flesh the Wise Men set their eyes on. *Blessed*, Jesus says, *is the one not offended - not turned away, not tripped up - by Me* (Matthew 11:6). Or, we could say, is not offended by how He comes to us.

Not offended by how He comes to us.

How remarkable a statement is that? Our God comes to us who ruined His world, who rebelled against Him and continue to rebel, *and we're the offended ones?* The ones who often think He should do things differently, that the truth should be different, that He should be different? The ones who think what God calls sin really shouldn't be sin or what God calls good really isn't good at all? That God should love us differently? That we deserve better from Him?

We're the offended ones?

We who love our stuff more than we love God, and regard the love of others more than the love of God.

Who value His name that He put on us so little that sometimes we don't even want others to know we're Christians?

Who think so little of His Word that it doesn't even make it off our shelves during the week, and allow the things of this world to keep us away from church on Sundays?

Who despise the parents and authorities He has placed over us and so disrespect and rebel against them?

Who value life so little that we hate to be inconvenienced by others, and wish the guy who cut us off or took our parking space or made fun of us at school dead?

Who abuse our sexuality, have eyes filled with lust, and do not cherish the spouse given to us?

Who think buying and getting and keeping more important than giving and sharing?

Who think nothing of gossip and tearing to shreds the reputation of our neighbor?

Who covet and want for ourselves what God has given to our neighbor?

We're the offended ones? No! We are the people who don't deserve to have God come to us. Who don't deserve a star or a Word or a Saviour.

And yet He came. And if you recognized yourself in all that unworthiness and sin, then He came **for you**. And He came in the only way He could in order not to destroy us with His glory. And in order to destroy our sin and death with His own. He came as a man to die, that men and women who die might then rise to life again. He came poor for the poor, lowly for the lowly, and became a sinner for sinners. That the poor might become rich in Him. That the lowly be exalted in Him. That sinners become saints in Him. That

we rebellious fools become Wise Men, in Him.

So He who came for you wants you here with Him. He who knows your name and everything about you - everything you keep secret and hidden from everyone else, He knows. And He wants you *because* He knows it all. Because He wants to give you His gift of forgiveness. His gift of freedom from that shame. His gift of life. To be your strength in weakness, your hope when everything seems hopeless, your confidence when all looks lost, your love in a world of hate.

So come to Me, He says. Maybe no longer speaking with an angel, or a star, or a wicked king, but the invitation is the same.

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.*

The world can be a pretty dark place. Our hearts can be pretty dark places. But a light is shining for you. Not of a star but of a Son. ***The glory of the Lord has risen*** and come to earth, He has risen from the dead, and now He arises also upon you. In you. For He wants you here, and He wants you there, with Him, forever. Whether you are a somebody in this world or a nobody in this world, you are dearly loved by the only one who matters. The One who came to die and rise for you, and is here for you, and is coming again for you.

So come, fall down and worship Him. Receive Him who comes to you now in the same Body and Blood the Wise Men fell down before and worshiped. For by so doing, you too, are a Wise Man indeed.

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

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