

Sermon for 1-3-2021, Epiphany – Farmington, NM

Wisemen – and Women -- still seek Him

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Today we commemorate Epiphany, beginning the Epiphany season which this year is seven Sundays long, lasting until Lent begins on February 17. Actually Epiphany is this coming Wednesday, 12 days after Christmas. For nearly half of the Christian world – the Eastern Orthodox half – Epiphany is their Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the coming of the Magi to worship the Christ-child – the first gentiles, non-Jews, to recognize Jesus as their Savior and King. In the Eastern church Epiphany, their Christmas, is a purely religious festival, free from the commercialism and secular commotion which is a big part of our Christmases. In the East the gift-giving is done a month earlier on St. Nicholas Day which is December 6. Also in Orthodox countries the celebration of Jesus' birth first begins on January 6 and then continues for 10 days or so after Epiphany rather than dying abruptly the day after Christmas like in our culture.

The Epiphany season has an important purpose in the church year, besides filling the gap between Christmas and Lent. The word Epiphany means “manifestation” or “showing forth.” The dictionary defines it as “an appearing of a god.” The human side of Jesus was obvious at Christmas. There he lay a little baby, dependent on his mother for food and care. The human side will be obvious during Lent as we see him mocked, beaten, crucified, dead, and buried. Between Christmas and Lent we stop to remind ourselves that this was no ordinary human. This babe of Bethlehem, this man of Nazareth is God. During the Epiphany season the readings point to the miracles and to other supernatural proofs which manifest or clearly show forth that Jesus is God.

Notice that the church year separates the coming of the Wisemen from the birth of Jesus. Despite what most Christmas cards and nativity sets show, the Wisemen did not come to the stable. The Bible says they came to the *house where the child was*. Also, on the basis of the information the Wisemen gave him, Herod ordered the killing of all boy babies two years old and younger – that would seem to be an excessive margin for error if he were looking for a newborn. The evidence points to the Wisemen's arrival at least 40 days after Christmas. In my opinion the most convincing evidence is the fact that, when Mary and Joseph went to the Temple on the 40th day after Jesus' birth, they brought two doves for sacrifice – a poor person's gift. If the Magi had already come and given their precious gifts, certainly Mary and Joseph could have afforded a lamb, the usual offering. Also, if the Magi had already come and informed Herod of Jesus' birth, it would have been very dangerous for Mary and Joseph to bring their son to Jerusalem, Herod's capitol city.

Our sermon theme is “**Wisemen – and Women -- still seek Him.**” It's a good slogan. The Bible tells us: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Respect for God is the starting point for true wisdom, and respect for God leads us quickly to the Savior God sent into our world to rescue us.

Today we join the Wisemen -- as they seek the Christ-child in Bethlehem. We will concentrate especially on the gifts the Wisemen brought: GOLD FOR A KING, INCENSE FOR A GOD, MYRRH FOR ONE WHO CAME TO DIE.

I'd like you to meet the Wisemen today. There are a number of them, although we don't know just how many. Common tradition says three; another less-known one says 12. The Bible,

however, doesn't tell us the number. It only says WiseMEN. There's nothing in the Bible to indicate that one was a black man either. They came from the East – from Babylon or Persia – 600 or 700 miles away.

They are called "magi" in the Greek language. That was an honorable title in that day. It means "scholars or learned men." The Wisemen were not kings as one song tells it. Rather they were scholars in that mixture of superstition, magic, and fact which made up the science of that day. Much of their time was spent in what we call astrology, the study of the skies for omens and divine guidance.

One day these Wisemen spotted something in the sky which they knew had to mean something BIG. They saw a new star suddenly appear. In all their stargazing in the past, they had never known anything like this to happen. What could it mean? It had to be a sign from God that something of worldwide significance had just happened. These astrologers set out to find the star's meaning. They took along GOLD FOR A KING.

We know for a fact that it was well-known throughout the civilized world of that day that a mighty king was expected to come out of Israel. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote: "There had spread all over the east an old and established belief that it was fated for men coming from Judea at that time to rule the world." If that belief was known in faraway Rome, certainly scholars like the Magi who lived in the Middle East had heard it.

Moreover, about 600 years earlier the Jewish nation had been slaves in Babylon, and many Jews still lived there. Undoubtedly at least highlights of God's promises to his Chosen People were known in that region. It is possible these scholars even had a copy of the Old Testament in their library. Maybe they had read it and were familiar with the prophecy in the book of Numbers: "There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter (the sign of a king) shall rise out of Israel" (24:17).

Just how God led them to understand it, we don't know, but the Wisemen concluded that the star must signal the birth of this promised King. They packed up gold to give him, and then traveled straight to Jerusalem, Israel's capital city. They went right to King Herod's palace. Where else would you expect to find a king? And they 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" (2).

Herod's own wisemen rightly concluded that these Eastern visitors were searching for the long-promised Messiah. They correctly referred them to Micah's prophecy which said that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

The Wisemen journeyed on to Bethlehem. There they discovered the Christ-child under strange circumstances for a king -- in a lowly house in an insignificant village of no more than 2,000 inhabitants in a second-rate land. Strange that a king would have such obviously poor parents. Strange that he apparently had no attendants and no other worshippers were to be found. Strange circumstances for a world king, but the Wisemen believed for they had seen the star and had seen how it pointed out the house. Eyes were hard-pressed to detect a king here, but their heart saw him. God moved those hearts to believe. They offered their royal gift -- a king's treasure -- GOLD.

Indeed these Wisemen were right that first Epiphany. The King of kings and Lord of lords was before them -- the eternal King come down from Heaven to establish an everlasting

kingdom – a kingdom which would know no physical boundaries, but would rule in the hearts of believers across the whole, wide world.

The Wisemen knew that there was more here than just a king, however. That is why they also packed incense in their camels' bags. INCENSE is FOR A GOD. Thousands of years of promises and prophecies are not given to prepare for a mere earthly king. A special star is not put into the sky for any ordinary ruler. A star does not move in the sky to point out the house of a human lord. Indeed the prophecies clearly confirmed that too, for they said this king would come from everlasting and would reign forevermore. Only God could be eternal like that. Only God could reign over the entire world.

These religious scholars very possibly knew of Isaiah's prophecy calling this son born of a virgin Immanuel, God with Us (7:14). They likely knew Isaiah had said the child to be born would be called "mighty God" (9:6).

Incense was used primarily in temples for worship of gods. When the Wisemen gave incense, they showed that they felt and saw the divine here. Maybe they couldn't put their finger on it fully, but they sensed that God was clearly present. They fell down before Christ with the kind of adoration and gift that showed they believed he was God.

The Wisemen were correct. In fact this is the key doctrine of our Bible -- the telling question for all time: "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" (Mt.22:42) God's answer is that he is the Son of God -- true God come down from heaven to live among men and bridge the otherwise uncrossable gap between sinful humans and holy God.

The third gift the Wisemen brought appears at first glance to be somewhat strange as a gift to give a baby, for they brought MYRRH FOR ONE WHO WOULD DIE.

Myrrh is a costly orange-colored resin which was used to make perfume, anointing oils, and embalming fluids. Perhaps the Magi gave myrrh for its value. Perhaps they thought of it being used as baby oil for the child. But the fact remains that use in burying bodies is one of its common uses. Myrrh was sprinkled under the burial wrappings to help preserve the body and to control the odor as it deteriorated. In fact, the Bible mentions that myrrh was used in Jesus' burial.

How well the Wisemen understood the significance of their gift depends on how well they knew the Old Testament. They may have understood that this child would have to die, for it is clearly stated in prophecy. Isaiah wrote in chapter 53: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. They would have assigned him a grave with the wicked, but he was given a grave with the rich in his death" (6,8,9).

Whether the Wisemen understood the significance of their gift of myrrh or not, this gift was as appropriate as the other two. This child came to die as man's substitute. Sin is punishable by death, God says. So, if we who are sinful are going to live, someone had to die in our place. This is what Jesus, the holy king, the true God, came to do.

Each Christmas children receive gifts of exciting toys or games. On the other hand, we adults tend to get a different kind of gifts. I got a warm flannel shirt because my wife felt I would need it here in Farmington. As adults our gifts usually are not particularly glamorous or

exciting. Rather they are things that we need. Baby Jesus, the lowly child of poor parents, did not seem glamorous or exciting, but he came to be the Savior, exactly the gift you and I and the world needed.

Sometimes that carefully-chosen gift which someone else thought we needed goes unused because we don't feel we need it. That was the case with most of the people in Israel that first Christmas. No one seemed to share the Magi's excitement over God's great gift. Herod got nervous and worried. The people were disinterested. As far as we know, no one had taken note of the star, and no one bothered to join the Wisemen in their search. Even though all that may have struck the Wisemen as strange, it wasn't really. For they had just witnessed the age-old problem of unbelief.

We were born as unbelievers, too. The faith in our hearts today is a gift from God because God performed a miracle in each of us – a miracle he planned already back before he created the world, back when he elected us -- predestined us -- to be saved. When we came into this world, God worked his plan in us. Whether it was at the time of our infant-Baptism or sometime later in life through his Word, God entered into our hearts and broke down our sinful and willful resistance. Our Lutheran Confessions say that in conversion God makes the unwilling willing. He transformed our unwillingness to trust in him into a willingness to believe in Jesus as our Savior. We who by nature didn't want Christ – didn't see any need for him – we found our will changed so we want the forgiveness he offers. *He [God] has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light* (1 Peter 2:9). God led the Magi to the Christ-child. Part of God's Christmas gift to us – part of the gift we really need – is the saving faith he has given us. God has led also us to the Christ-child. He has called us to salvation through the Good News recorded for us in the Bible.

I'm somewhat of an expert on killing trees. Back when we lived in Michigan I killed hundreds. Planting a batch of pine seedlings – 50 each year – was one of my rituals of spring. And then I'd forget about them. And you know what, many of them died each year. I did an experiment one year – I tried watering them during the hot, dry spells of summer. Amazing thing – a lot more survived that year than usually did. I drew the conclusion that trees need water. But I must admit something – the next year I was back to my old ways again – planting and forgetting about the ongoing need for water. The Bible is the spiritual water our faith needs if it is to remain healthy and bear fruit. And yet don't we repeatedly forget to water our faith?

We don't have a special star in the sky to lead us to Jesus these days. We have something much brighter and clearer. We have the Bible to lead us to Jesus. That's why we read the Bible. God has given us reliable and readable translations like our Northwestern Publishing House's new Evangelical Heritage Version. That's why we study the Bible. That's why your congregation holds Bible study on Sundays and offers a Sunday school for the children. That's why we support the sharing of God's Word through our WELS program of worldwide mission outreach. And that's why your congregation is working with the mission counselor to plan outreach to your community. God uses the Bible to lead us to Jesus. **WISEMEN – AND WOMEN – STILL SEEK HIM, and in the pages of the Bible, THEY FIND HIM.**

One final thought: As you use your Bible and find strength and help for yourself there, reach out with the Word to those around you. It only takes a simple invitation to a friend, neighbor, relative or coworker – a simple invitation to **come** with you to worship or Bible study **and see** what God's Word can do for them. I'm sure someone you know is thirsty for spiritual water.