

Epiphany – Vicar Lehne Sermon

Matthew 2:1-12: “Jesus Is the Light of the Whole World”

1/6/24; 1/7/24 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

O God, our heavenly Father, you led the wise men to your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, by the light of the star. In doing so, you showed that Jesus, the true Light, came to save the whole world from the darkness of their sin. Therefore, whenever we worry that the darkness of our sin is too great, help us to remember Jesus came to save all of us and that he dispelled our darkness with his marvelous light. In his name we pray. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

⁹ After listening to the king, [the wise men] went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is the Light of the whole world, dear fellow redeemed:

There is always excitement when a child is born, whether it's your own child or the child of someone you know. However, the excitement is usually limited to only the friends and family of the ones who had the child. Outside of them, the birth of a child doesn't get much fanfare at all. But now imagine that, sometime after one of your own children was born and the excitement had died down, an airplane landed in the nearby airport, and a parade of important-looking vehicles drove through town and over to your house. Surely, there must be some mistake, right? After all, there's no way such important-looking vehicles would stop by your house. Then, suddenly, the doors to the vehicles open, and who should exit them and approach your front door but the royal family from England? You must be imagining things at this point. Why would anyone important show up at your house, let alone the royal family? But you soon realize that you're not imagining it as they enter your house, greet you, and then, after asking where your new child is, approach him, bow down to him, and present him with gifts. But these are not just any gifts; they are some of the crown jewels. Then, before you can even process what is going on, the royal family says their goodbyes, exits your house, gets back into their vehicles, returns to the airport, and flies back to England. No doubt there would be quite a lot going through your head after all that, and among those thoughts would probably be two questions: "How did the royal family find out about the birth of my child?" and "Why did they travel all the way here just to do this for my child?" The arrival of the wise men to worship Jesus and present him with expensive and valuable gifts raises similar questions.

Even though the birth of Jesus was a big deal, since it was when God, the Light of the world, came down in the flesh to begin his saving work of delivering us from our sins, it was an event that didn't get widespread fanfare. True, there was a multitude of angels that appeared to a group of shepherds to announce his birth, which was certainly a spectacular event, but those angels didn't appear to anyone else. Then, after the shepherds saw the Christ Child with their own eyes, they "made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child" (Luke 2:17). But even though "all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them" (Luke 2:18), the news doesn't appear to have spread very far. When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem and asked the Jews who were in the city, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (verse 2), they didn't get an answer until King Herod assembled "all the chief priests and scribes of the people" (verse 4) and "inquired of them where the Christ was to be born" (verse 4).

So, if there weren't even many Jews who knew that the promised Messiah had been born, how did the wise men, who were foreigners from a faraway country, find out that he had been born? We know they saw a special star in the sky, but they must have also heard the prophecies about the Christ, that he would come to save all people from their sins.

Without this promise and the faith that God the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts, the wise men would have remained in the darkness of their sin. But, through his Word, God revealed to the wise men that there was hope for them. One day, a Savior would be born, who would be God in the flesh, and that Savior would be a light that dispels their darkness and saves them from their sins. The promise of that Savior gave the wise men hope that, when they died, they were not doomed to enter into the eternal darkness of hell, but would instead be welcomed into the eternal light radiating from the Savior in heaven.

If the wise men did not believe this, then they would have had no reason to follow the star when it appeared in the sky. If the star was leading them to someone who was just a man, or to someone who would just be a king for the Jews, what reason would they have to make that long journey, carrying expensive and valuable gifts with them, and worship that person? The wise men knew that the light of the star was leading them to the true Light, and they knew that he was not just a light to the Jews, but a light to the whole world. As Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

Your situation was similar to that of the wise men. You were conceived in the darkness of sin, just like they were. And that sin only becomes more apparent to you the older you get. You know that there is no way for you to escape from the darkness of your sin, and that you rightfully deserve to enter into the eternal darkness of hell when you die to be punished for your sin. But you also know that there is hope for you, and unlike the wise men, who did not yet know everything that Jesus would do for them, God has revealed to you in his Word how the light of Jesus dispels the darkness of your sin and saved you from it, opening the doors of eternal life to you.

Jesus was born, just like all of you were born, yet he was born without sin. He grew up like all children do, yet he did not give in to the temptations that you all face even once. He healed the sick and raised the dead during his earthly ministry, showing his power over death. Then, though he was without sin, he became sin for you by taking all your sin on himself and putting

your sin to death with him on the cross. And, just when it looked like death had won by swallowing him up in its darkness, Jesus' light shone again when he rose from the dead, putting an end to the power that death had over you and ensuring that everyone who believes in him would one day also rise from the dead to be with him, in his glorious light, forever.

Jesus, the Light of the world, now lives in each of you, but the darkness of sin wants you back. It is always there, trying to work its way back into your heart so that it can swallow you up once again. And, if you do not take sin seriously and live in your sin without repentance, the darkness of sin would prevail against you. But Jesus continues to work in you through his Word to move you to repentance and to dispel your darkness. As Jesus says, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). With Jesus continually at work in your hearts, the darkness of sin can never prevail against you. This good news causes you to rejoice "exceedingly with great joy" (verse 10) and to worship Jesus, just like the wise men did.

You make a journey to worship Jesus whenever you gather around his Word and Sacraments. Your journey may not look like that of the wise men, who followed the light of the star over a vast distance so that they could worship Jesus, the true Light, and offer him gifts. But it is a journey that is just as significant as theirs. For when you do gather together to worship our Savior and offer him your gifts, you are bathed in his glorious light. This light comes through the preaching of his Word and the administering of his Sacraments and dispels the darkness of sin that constantly tries to swallow you up again. You may not offer up the same gifts that the wise men did, nor may they have the same material value, but the gifts that you do offer Jesus show your faith in him and your love for him just as much as the gifts of the wise men did.

Try as it might, the darkness of sin cannot have us, because the light of Jesus lives within us. As the apostle John says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). This is good news for us, but the darkness of sin still has its hold on most of the world. They are without hope, but they are continually searching for hope and meaning in everything except for God's Word. But we do have God's Word, and we know that God's Word is not just for a select few, but for the whole world. That is why we want to tell others the good news that Jesus, the Light of the world, has saved them from the darkness of their sin. As the apostle Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Proclaiming God's Word is an honor that God has given to all Christians, including you. Now, some of you may think that you are not qualified to proclaim the good news to others because you aren't properly trained, like pastors are. But, while pastors do get special training, that doesn't mean that they are the only ones who are qualified to tell the good news about Jesus, nor does it mean that they have learned how to convince someone to come to faith in Jesus. Only God can create faith. All we can do is point others to the Light.

We are like the star that led the wise men to Jesus, the true Light. When we proclaim the good news about Jesus to others, the light of his grace shines into their darkened hearts, and we pray that the Holy Spirit works saving faith in their hearts. God truly can use any Christian to accomplish this, no matter how unqualified they may feel they are. And often, the people who

have the most success sharing the good news and getting others engaged with the Word are not pastors, but Christians like you, who reach out to their friends and family.

One of the reasons why it can be hard to spread the good news of Jesus to others is because we may not always be sure if the light of Jesus' grace and forgiveness is for us. This is especially something we can wonder when we are faced with the true darkness of some of our sins. But Jesus tells us that he is not just the Light of a select few, but the Light of the whole world. No matter how bad our sin is, he shines through the darkness of our sin and gives us hope that the eternal life in heaven that he won on the cross is for all of us. And, until we enter the gates of heaven, where we will be bathed in his glorious light for all eternity, his light will continue to live in us and cut through our darkness so that we don't need to fear it ever again.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +