

The Epiphany of Our Lord – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 2:1-12: “We Worship the King of Kings.”
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In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, You have given us the light of Your holy Word, the guiding star that leads us to the Christ-child: Send, we beseech You, Your Holy Spirit into our hearts, that we may receive this light and make use of it for our salvation, and that we, like the wise men, when they were seeking the star, may not be afraid because of any hardship or peril, but put all our trust in Your only-begotten Son as our only Savior, devote our earthly possessions to the advancement of Your kingdom, and in all things serve Him, Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, p. 149)

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 written in the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

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, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” / When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ‘And 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.’” / Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.” / After listening to the king, they 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (ESV)

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

In Christ Jesus, at whose name “*every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Phi. 2:10-11), dear fellow redeemed:

When strange men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, they could not have asked a more provocative question: “*Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?*” Very quickly their question reached the ears of King Herod. These men from the east, described in our reading as *magi* or

wise men, did not know that Herod was one of the most wicked kings in the history of Israel. He was a very jealous king who even had some of his own sons killed in order to preserve his power.

And now these men were asking about a newborn "*King of the Jews*." Far from wondering about this, even when he heard the Old Testament prophecies about the Christ, Herod immediately made plans to destroy this little rival to his throne. But he didn't let the wise men see his rage. They could make his job easier. If they found this so-called "Christ," they could tell Herod where He was, and then Herod could kill Him.

Herod must have been a convincing liar. The wise men did not suspect a thing. Herod acted like a fellow believer. He wanted to know everything they could tell him about the star and the promise attached to it. He may have indicated that there were some bad characters who would oppose this Baby in Bethlehem, but that he, Herod, would see to it that the Child was protected. Herod was so certain that he had the wise men tricked, that he did not feel the need to send them to Bethlehem with his own officials or soldiers. He had set the trap, and these Gentiles from the east were walking right into it.

The contrast between the two kings in today's reading could not be more pronounced. King Herod was exceedingly active. When he heard the news about some other king of the Jews, he turned the whole city upside down to get to the bottom of this problem. When he called the religious leaders to come, they came. He pulled the strings on all the people around him, including the innocent wise men. No one dared challenge him or cross him. King Herod had power, and he used it.

The other King we hear about was under two years old at this time. This King counted on his humble mother Mary and his guardian Joseph for everything – food, clothing, a place to live. He had no other attendants (at least visible ones). He pulled no strings, ordered no one around, threatened no one. He had no obvious power. He may have been called a "king" by the men from the east, but He hardly seemed it.

And yet, this was the King the wise men had come to worship. That was their stated reason for making the long trip: "*We have come to worship this newborn King*." And that's what they did when the special star from God led them to Jesus' house in Bethlehem. When they entered the house and saw this Child with Mary His mother, "*they fell down and worshiped Him*." What an absurd sight! Grown men falling on their faces and worshiping before a toddler! What could He do for them, this little diapered Child?

Their actions are a beautiful example of faith. If they were looking for a king with obvious power and influence, they would have stuck with Herod. But they were looking for a King of promise, One who could rise above all political intrigues and petty jealousies. They hadn't just seen a new star appear in the sky and decided to follow it because they had nothing better to do. Somehow, some way, they knew this star was tied to God's promise to send a Savior.

This Savior was born of the Jews, but He was not just for the Jews. He was for all people, including these Gentile men from the east. If they did not believe this, they would not have worshiped Jesus and brought Him gifts. That is why the Epiphany of our Lord, celebrated on January 6 just after

the twelve days of Christmas, is often called “Christmas for the Gentiles.” It was the first time that non-Jewish people laid eyes on the Christ-Child.

We are Gentiles like them. Most if not all of us have descended from the Gentile peoples who did not have the Old Testament Scriptures, who did not know the Promise. But after His resurrection, Jesus made it clear that His message of salvation was to be broadcast to “*all nations*” (Mat. 28:19). Disciples were to be made for Him from people of all ages, nationalities, and languages by baptizing them in His name and teaching them His Word.

You have become one of these disciples. As great as the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh given by the wise men were, you have received greater ones. You have received the forgiveness of all your sins, the righteousness of Jesus’ perfect life credited to you, and the assurance of eternal life in His kingdom. You received these gifts when you were a little child like Jesus, when you seemingly had nothing to offer Him or the Church. At your Baptism, your Lord was not seeking to get something from you; He was present there to give you the gifts of His grace.

But He did not come with visible displays of power. The heavens did not visibly open and bright rays did not shine down on you when you were baptized. The same goes for your hearing of the Word and receiving the body and blood of Jesus in His Supper today. These do not come with impressive signs like glowing light, the sound of a rushing wind, or a tingly feeling that God is near. You trust that God is active through His Word and in your life because He promises that He is.

Faith clings to His promise. When the wise men saw the star over Bethlehem, “*they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*” They rejoiced because of the promise attached to the star, that the King of the Jews had been born for the salvation of the world. The Bible, the true Word of God, is that same guiding star for us. We sang about it in our opening hymn: “As a star, God’s holy Word / Leads us to our King and Lord” (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #120, v. 6).

We rejoice exceedingly with great joy because “*the King of the Jews*” worshiped by the wise men is our King too. He is the King of creation. He is the King over sin, death, and devil. He is the King who reigns at the right hand of the Father, and who shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead (Nicene Creed). He is the “*King of kings*” and “*Lord of lords*,” as the Bible describes Him (1Ti. 6:15, Rev. 17:14, 19:16).

But it does not always appear so in this life. The Church of all believers, the body of Christ, does not look very powerful. We often feel threatened or afraid about what might happen to us. We are tricked and betrayed by the false promises of those who seem to have power and influence, like the wise men were by King Herod. We wish that God propelled His kingdom forward by outward displays of majesty and might. We know we are on the winning side, but we would like to see this and experience it.

The wise men are good examples and teachers for us. They followed the promise of God with steadfast and joyful hearts. No matter what wicked plots and intrigues were happening all around them, they went forward in faith and hope. And when they found the Christ-Child, who displayed no visible power and authority, they humbly fell before Him and offered Him their gifts. We do the same when we hold to the promise of God revealed in His Word, no matter what

temptations or trials come our way. We hear His Word and receive His gifts in the Divine Service, though they come with no visible show of God's power. And we respond with our own humble gifts of praise, thanksgiving, and a godly life.

To outsiders, unbelievers, this all seems utterly ridiculous and foolish. They may look at believers in Christ as Herod viewed the wise men—as simpletons, easily manipulated, inferior people who hold to an empty faith. They want the Christian Church to crumble and fade into history. But we have a secret weapon: we have the Lamb.

Revelation 17 describes the kings of this world who receive their power from the devil. Verse 14 says, *"They will make war on the Lamb."* This should be an easy victory. What could be more vulnerable or weaker than a lamb? But that isn't what happens. We read that *"They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings."* This Lamb is the eternal Son of God who became a Baby born of the virgin Mary. He is the One who offered up His spotless life to take away the sin of the world, including your sin and mine.

He may have looked like nothing but a little Child when the wise men came calling, but they saw Him differently by the grace of God, and so do you. This Christ-Child, the Lamb, the suffering Servant crowned with thorns and hanging on a cross is no King the world wants. But He is the only King who matters. He is the only King who saves. **We Worship the King of Kings.** You know where to look for Him. You find Him where He promises to be found. And that is right here, through His Word, for your eternal good.

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.

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