

The Epiphany of Our Lord
St. Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Yesterday was the twelfth and final day of Christmas; it was the end of the season of Christmas, which means today begins the new season, and it begins with the Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord.

Epiphany, at its root, means “into the light.” It means “appearing” or “manifestation.” When someone has an epiphany, it usually means they realize something or they finally get it. In the realm of religion and things spiritual, it refers to the manifestation of a god—a god appearing in human form, or in some cases, that of an animal or some other concrete form.

Epiphany is celebrated as the visit of the wise men in western churches—supposed astrologers from the east who came to worship Jesus and present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For that reason, Epiphany is referred to as the “Gentile Christmas,” as the wise men were the first Gentile worshipers of the Christ. Up until the events of today’s text, God had only revealed Himself in the flesh to Jews and heavenly messengers—angels and shepherd, Anna and Simeon, and perhaps any others that these may have told. The wise men, however, were Gentile worshipers, and the first people from outside of the Chosen People to lay eyes upon God-with-us.

These wise men were from Babylon—modern-day Iraq and Iran. The only connection to anything Israelite they may have had would have been their ancestors’ capture and captivity of David’s descendants some 590-or-so years earlier. They could even have been disciples of another wise man mentioned in the Scriptures—Daniel, who was part of that captivity. Because of that, they may have had access to the Israelite Scriptures, as much as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah would have carried with them and taught the Babylonians and Chaldeans. Still, the main focus of their work, astrologers as they likely were, would have been the starry skies. And these men still came to worship the Christ-Child and acknowledge Him as King and God.

However, these wise men are not the first Gentiles mentioned in today’s Gospel lesson. Paranoid Herod was a Gentile, too. He was an Idumean or Edomite. His roots go back to Esau, the eldest son of Isaac who forsook his birthright. He was a crafty, yet paranoid politician. He was appointed to the throne by Caesar, after he had “befriended” Caesar, sweet-talked his way into Caesar’s good graces. He also killed his own wives and sons, nephews and even uncles, for fear of His throne. There was an old saying, “It was safer to be one of Herod’s pigs than one of his sons.”

He, too, had access to the Israelite Scriptures. Being in the presence of the Jews, there is no way he could not have heard a snippet here or there in passing or overheard the God of the Scriptures being talked about. Being a Gentile puppet king placed in Jerusalem by Rome should not have had a bearing on his access to the Scriptures, though certainly his understanding of them. So, he has advisers who do know the Scriptures. When the wise men arrive at the palace seeking the newborn king, paranoid Herod calls to the chief priests and scribes to discern where the Christ was to be born. Herod knows a little, enough to be dangerous—such as calling the King the wise men were looking for the Christ—but he doesn’t know it all.

Herod’s wise men answer:

In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.”

So, Herod sends the wise men on their way with the invitation to return and let him know where the Child was so he could go and “worship,” too. They go to Bethlehem, following the star, and find the

house where the family was staying. They present their gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—and worship the Christ. “Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.” I guess that says much about the wise men, too, that they weren’t wise enough to see the insanity of the puppet king in Jerusalem.

Herod is incensed, as we heard these past two week, and goes on his murderous rampage in an attempt to save his grip on the throne from a boy two-years old or younger.

Merry Gentile Christmas. Matthew is, once again, pointing out that here is an event that fulfills Old Testament prophecy, though not in so many words. For in the visit on the magi is fulfilled what was said by the prophet Isaiah, as we heard earlier this evening: “The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising...All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.” (Isaiah 60:3, 6b) This is why the wise men, though not being kings, are often depicted as kings, and in number three for the gold, frankincense, and myrrh mentioned in Matthew. Nevertheless, what Isaiah spoke is fulfilled as these Gentiles visit the toddling Lord of lords and King of kings, bringing their gold and incense.

And in this, Matthew also teaches us this lesson: God is the god of Jew and Gentile, alike; no one country or ethnic group or however else you want to group people, has a hold on God as their god alone. God is the god of the whole world, as Isaiah also writes: “I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6b)

“Wise men still seek Him,” the pithy Hallmark saying goes. It usually rears it’s ugly head around this time (or perhaps around 13 days ago). How far from the truth that is. The truth of the matter is that no one seeks Him, no matter how wise or foolish they are.

While it can certainly appear that these wise men from the east sought Jesus, and truly they did as they entered Jerusalem and went to the palace (where else would you go to seek a king?), recall that they were led out of the east and out of Jerusalem by a star. These star gazing wise men were led to the house in Bethlehem by a star placed in the sky when the Child was born. Notice how Matthew tells us that once they were instructed that the Child was not in Jerusalem, the star appeared once again before them, and when they again saw the star, they rejoiced! He who placed the stars in the sky, placed one that invited these star gazers from the east to come and worship Him, and then made it appear again to get these wise men on the right track.

Herod had his wise men, too. They saw the signs, they had the Scriptures, they more-than-likely saw the star that came to rest over the house where the child was, yet not one of them “sought” the Child. These all remained in Jerusalem, at least until Herod discovered that he had been duped. Then, he sought the Child, if you can call killing every boy in Bethlehem two or younger seeking.

Matthew is here teaching what Luther taught in the Third Article: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him...” In order to come to the Lord, you must be invited and led, like the wise men. By your own reason or strength, you would be like Herod and his wise men: your own reason and strength serve only yourselves—you would seek Jesus only to suit your own needs; or you would seek a Jesus to suit your own needs.

And you are already guilty of those, dear hearers. How much like Herod you are—you who are called by God’s name! Herod sought the Child to have Him exterminated and clear the threat to his illegitimate hold on the throne in Jerusalem. Today, you seek God only when you feel we have a need—take as an example all those who are seeking a church that cater to “felt needs”; see yourself when confronted with a situation beyond your control as compared to one you think is within your control. Herod sought to get rid of the Child because He didn’t fulfill Herod’s desire for a long reign. How easily it is for you to dispose of God when you feel He doesn’t do for you what you think you need, when He doesn’t give you what you want—take as an example all those in the “felt needs” churches who, when

confronted with the true Word of God, go off looking for something else; see yourself when God doesn't answer your prayer in the manner you like.

No, apart from God, the greatest thing you seek is affirmation. God certainly provides affirmation, but it is not the kind you want to hear: "You are a sinner and deserve death for your sin." It is God's Word, so it is truth, but it is truth—affirmation—that you in your Old Flesh don't want to hear. Of course, He has more to say, but it is so difficult to get past the first part, that ears are often shut to the second part, that it becomes even more offensive: "But I have grace in My Son who died in your place to give you forgiveness, life, and salvation."

Sadly, this means there are many people who are more Herod-like than already mentioned. That is to say, while everyone has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, not all are saved. There are those who refuse the grace of God. He tells you of your sins and freely gives you forgiveness in His Son. But there are those who hear this and simply say, "No thanks," or, "That's not me," or, "I can do it on my own, I don't need God."

The wise men were led to the house by the star, whereupon they entered and bowed down and worshiped the toddling Creator and Redeemer of the world, presenting Him their gifts. Being in the presence of the Word of God is a life changer, when it doesn't fall on deaf ears and a hard heart. These wise men become the first recorded Gentile worshipers of the True God who was enfleshed; even at such a young age, the eternal Word of God incarnate is enlightening those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. (cf. Isaiah 9:2) Sure, these wise men brought their gifts, but they received a greater gift.

Luther continued, "...but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Yes, the Word of God even has effect on you who are now listening to it. You are here by the Spirit's guiding. You have been called by the Gospel, and through it, by the Spirit, you are sanctified and kept in the true faith. You are set apart and redeemed. You are given remission for your sins, not the least of which is seeking Jesus only in times of felt needs and abandoning Him when those felt needs aren't met. You receive this, because He is here to meet the greatest of needs and give you His greatest of gifts: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.