

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.

On this day after the Twelfth and last day of Christmas, we observe and celebrate the Epiphany. Jesus, the Son of Man and Son of God, God-with-us, is revealing Himself to the nations. He is bringing news of salvation to the Gentiles, just as He promised. (cf. Isaiah 49:6) And He is doing so by bringing some Gentiles to Him, having given them the sign they were waiting for in the heavens.

But, how did they know to equate this sign with the birth of the King? We have to go back about 600 years before Jesus was born. At that time, Judah was taken captive by Babylon. It was the third year of the reign of the king Jehoiakim, and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem.

And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god. Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king. Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego. (Daniel 1:2-7)

There was a very ingenious reason for Nebuchadnezzar to appoint these four young men and others among the Judean men to their positions. As was just read from the book of Daniel, they possessed knowledge and understanding, they were gifted in wisdom, which made them suitable to serve in the king's palace. In order to rule over the Hebrews effectively, Nebuchadnezzar would need to surround himself with Judeans who were popular and able to be taught the ways of the Chaldeans.

The four men mentioned, did just that. Daniel, in particular, grew in favor with the Babylonian kings over and against Babylonian nobles who sought to have him, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah killed. Daniel survived a lions' den. The other three survived a fiery furnace. As a result, YHWH was honored by the Babylonian king, these young men and the Judeans were permitted to worship YHWH and not the gods of the Chaldeans, and all four eventually became advisers to the king. The Babylonian king is being served by Judean advisers!

This all happened as part of God's plan. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judea, the Judeans were taken captive into Babylon, some Judean men were made advisers to the Chaldean kings. It all stems from the obstinance of the Judean people, but God used the evil and rebelliousness of the people to accomplish His plan. He is bringing news of salvation to the Gentiles!

There was a time when John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees obstinance at his baptizing people in the Jordan with a baptism of repentance. He told them that they would not be able to get off so easy simply because they are children of Abraham. That's when He said it, "For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." (Matthew 3:9) If God's own

children were going to be rebellious and not heed His Word, then He would make from others His children. I suppose John could have pointed back to the visit of the wise men as proof; if the Jews don't want Him, then God will call the Gentiles to Him.

Of course, God wants both Jew and Gentile, and in Christ, there is no distinction between the two, but they are one in Him. Further, in Christ, the distinction between Jew and Gentile is done away with and they are all made Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4; Galatians 3:28-29)

Back in Babylon, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah fulfilled their vocation as advisers well. They learned from their Chaldean teachers and likely instructed them as well. These four wise men likely developed a following, gathering disciples, to whom they taught the Torah, whom they instructed in the promises of God, telling them that one day, God would send the Messiah to save the world.

About 600 years later, about 2 years after Jesus was born, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. They possess some knowledge of salvation as they were looking for the King that was to be born. It would seem by this knowledge that they could be descendants of those disciples of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. 600 years is a long time to wait and be influenced by other things. These supposed disciples of Daniel and friends were astrologers, it would seem. They knew by what their predecessors had been taught that a King was to be born among the Jews, and they thought it time by the sign given by a star.

Again, God is using the ways of men to accomplish His plan. God gives them the sign that they were looking for. The wise men from the east make their way west in search for the King of the Jews. And where do you go when looking for a king? You go to the king's palace, which for the Jews was in Jerusalem.

Imagine the look on the faces of the wise men upon entering Jerusalem. Celebration normally accompanies the birth of a baby. If that baby happens to be a prince or a king, that celebration should spill out onto the streets. But, when these wise men entered the city gates, and it was business as usual.

They made their way to the palace and had their audience with Herod where they asked their question in bewilderment. "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" This question troubled Herod, understandably so. Herod, a puppet king, would fear for his power should a new king have been born. At the same time, you might also imagine that he thought these travelers a bit crazy to be looking for something that obviously isn't there. His reaction might further have bewildered the wise men; so would the reaction of all Jerusalem, which, surprisingly, was troubled with Herod.

There is no knowledge of the Savior among those in Jerusalem. Herod knew something was up, though. Either that, or there was more interaction between the travelers and Herod that wasn't recorded. Herod called his wise men to him and asked where the Christ was to be born. We're getting into language, now, other than calling the One the wise men are looking for a king. Now, out of Herod's lips, Jesus is called the Christ. Herod's wise men search and report back:

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.

At this word, the wise men made their way to Bethlehem; Herod did not go with them, nor did Herod's wise men, nor, from all accounts, anyone else in Jerusalem. When they went their way, they saw the star again, rejoiced exceedingly, and followed it to the house where the Child was. This King has no earthly palace, but resides in a house. "And when they had come into the house, they saw the young

Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

The children of Abraham in Jerusalem do not heed the Word of God, but the Gentiles from the east do. Out of the stones from the east, God is making children of Abraham.

Things never change...at least on this side of eternity. The Bible has to be the most translated and most prolific book in all of history. Translations of the Bible at bookstores occupy as much room as all of the books about any other religion—for as many books as there are in a bookstore about any one religion, there are just as many Bibles, if not more, for sale. It stands to reason that just about everyone, at some time, has had access to a Bible.

What’s bewildering is that knowledge of things Biblical does not match with the proliferation of Bibles. Sure, many people can quote part of a Bible, and out of context at that, especially if it suits their agenda or ideal, but they really have no idea what it is they’re talking about. Contestants on game shows, such as Jeopardy, will fly through just about every category of trivial knowledge, but have just about no clue when it comes to knowledge of things Biblical. What’s frightening is that such knowledge—or lack thereof—is common among those who call themselves Christian, too, people who should know a thing or two, like the scribes in Jerusalem, who actually know next to nothing and showing no interest in the knowledge of salvation.

It begs the question what it is these Christians believe. What did the scribes and wise men in Jerusalem believe? It’s likely the same thing, and something which tempts you, too, dear hearers. The Scriptures point to Salvation in Bethlehem, and no one but outsiders goes rushing off to get there. The Scriptures point to Salvation from outside of yourselves, and you go rushing off looking for something that you must do in order to be saved.

It’s like the rich young ruler asking Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. (cf. Luke 18:18) It’s an absurd question. Ask that same question to our two older catechumens, and they’ll likely answer (if they can remember) that you can do nothing to inherit anything, but someone who loves you must die.

So, ask the question if you like. What must you do to be saved? The truth is that there is nothing you can do to be saved. Oh, there’s stuff to do, but you cannot do it! In order to be saved, One who loves you must die, and He must die in your place having done all the stuff there is to do, but that you cannot do.

Or, to go with a question more relevant to today’s text, does the news of the birth of the King trouble you? It’s really the same question already asked, or at least, it all comes from the same, dark heart. The Scriptures proclaim free forgiveness in Christ for you, that God would stoop so low to become one with you in order to bring you to Himself for that forgiveness. This is troubling because it goes against the idea that there has to be something for you to do to earn forgiveness; that it cannot have already been earned for you and given to you! It’s astounding news, and it is troubling.

Now, we have just come out of the season of Christmas, so this much may not be troubling, but there may be something in the Scriptures which you would find troubling. “Does it really say that?” or “So what if it says that.” You suffer the same affliction as the Jerusalem wise men.

Since you bear in your flesh the same malady as those wise men, what the Bible has to say is troubling, including the word of a Savior. You can take that word of a Savior two ways. The way God intends is that you see in Him **your** Savior—the one who has done all for you that you would be saved. The other way is that you see in Him the perfect example and archetype—the model life—in order for you to follow and earn your salvation. When you measure yourself against Jesus, though, you will find that you do not and will not measure up. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (cf. Romans

3:23) That's a troubling word. The thinking goes like this: "If all have sinned, then I have sinned, and if I have sinned, then God must be angry with me—He certainly has every right to be. God's coming to earth, the Christ being here, is troubling."

But, hold on a minute. Let's go back to the words of Herod's experts, back to the words of the prophet Micah:

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.

Yes, the King is come; the Ruler has come out of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. This Ruler has come as a shepherd, though. A shepherd cares for a flock, leading and guiding it, giving the flock what it needs to survive, protecting it from what seeks to do it harm. A shepherd's life is a life of continual service to the flock, not one of being an example to live up to or one of iron-fisted dictatorship. Jesus is the Ruler who is come to shepherd His people Israel—Abraham's seed; more than that, He is the good shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. (cf. John 10:11)

He gives His life for the sheep because, "All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6) This is the Word by which your conscience should be comforted. Your sheepishness is covered in the blood of the Good Shepherd, for your iniquity was laid upon Him. It is no longer with you, but removed from you.

This Good Shepherd was not found in Jerusalem after He was born, but He did end up there. Jesus made His way to the palatial city wherein He would be tried and convicted of all sin. And in order that you would inherit eternal life, He died with your sin, for which He was convicted and sentenced. Upon the cross outside of Jerusalem, Jesus shed His blood as your propitiation, in which, then, you were washed when you were brought to the font and made one of Abraham's seed. You, who were once a veritable stone are now an heir of eternal life with Jesus.

Jesus has come with wrath against sin, but with grace and mercy and all compassion for you. He would not see you die, but dies in your place. Did the wise men from the east know this? It's hard to say. There's no certainty that they were, in fact, disciples of Daniel or the three young men. And if they were, in those 600 years, their teaching and understanding could certainly have been influenced by the world around them. But they went to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem intent on worshiping the King of kings. And their gifts imply some sort of understanding for why this King—the Christ—has come. They brought gold, a gift fit for a king, frankincense, an incense burned in worship, and myrrh, a spice used in burial. This king, they confessed by their words and gifts, had come to die.

The truth of the matter is, Jesus did come to die. He has come and died for the wise men from the east. He also died for the wise men in Jerusalem, Herod, and all the people of Jerusalem. He has died for all men everywhere, wanting them all to come to a knowledge of salvation. (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4)

That's why you are here this evening, and come here for every Divine Service. Open your Bibles or not, they all point you to this King, the Christ Jesus, who is come and has come for your salvation. He was born, circumcised, lived, died, and rose again in order to make you an heir of His kingdom which has no end. This is what is proclaimed to you in this place, and as the Spirit grants, this is what you believe and confess. You are a new creation in Christ, and your New Man rejoices in this Word of comfort and compassion, much like the wise men rejoiced to see the star, that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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