

Sermon on **Matthew 2:1-12** for Epiphany 1.3.20
St. Paul's Lutheran – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

Had the excitement of the birth of the Christ waned in Bethlehem? Did the shepherds come back occasionally to check on the Christ child? Did Joseph find some carpentry work in Bethlehem? By what Matthew tells us, it seems they were months removed from the birth, the stable, the circumcision, the redemption of the redeemer and presentation at the temple, and settled in a house in Bethlehem. When it appears Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus were finding a new normal in Bethlehem, God does something amazing to reveal to them, to the Judean world, and to us – this Messiah, Jesus, is a Light for All nations, A light for you,

A Light for All.

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Foreign Professor types, regal advisors, the truly wise from a distant eastern land arrived and it was a surprise to everyone. We know some good wisemen, don't we? 500 years earlier Jews named Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faithfully served as Magi among a pagan empire, diligently serving King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, but not participating in pagan rituals or worship. Had these Magi we hear of today heard the promise passed down from Daniel or the Scriptures? Did God communicate directly with them? They studied the heavens. A supernatural star rose, a sign to them that the King of the Jews, had been born. So, they made the trip to Judea to worship him.

They made it to Judea and finally to Jerusalem. They inquired about the newborn “King of the Jews.” No doubt, a king of Judean descent would be born in Jerusalem at the palace to the king and queen. But King Herod was Idumean – an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Appointed by Caesar, Herod was not a rightful king by lineage or in his manner of ruling. Paranoid of any threat to his reign, he had the chief priest drowned, executed his wife, and three of his sons along the way. He was an evil man, treacherous and crafty, and Jerusalem feared him. Jerusalem went along to get along and save their skin. These wisemen unknowingly step into a den of lions a newborn King of the Jews! Instead of posters and parades, cheering crowds and celebrations with cleaning crews much like New York Times Square sees after New Year's Eve, they meet ignorance and fear. They met King Herod.

The Magi show us something great in the face of ignorance and darkness. They wanted to see Jesus! Scripture is trustworthy and true. We must obey God's Word, trusting his promises rather than man's, or man's feeling about it all. They maybe did not realize the danger Jesus was in, or that they were in, but they persisted in seeking the Savior. It had already been at great cost, time, and energy to themselves to seek out this newborn King. They would not stop until they saw him.

Spiritual darkness reigned where light should have been found. Jesus too would meet this treachery when he would visit Jerusalem in his ministry. The wisemen's request led even the fearful spiritually dark to search the Scriptures. The chief priests knew the content of Scripture but seemed devoid of faith. Their fear of Herod, saving their own skin, would not permit a spiritual revival in them to seek the Savior with the wisemen. *“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written.”* Even the faithless knew what the Scriptures said.

“Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” Herod the hypocrite feigns the desire to worship the king. His true motive we see shortly after the wisemen and Jesus leave, as he has all the boys of Bethlehem and its vicinity slaughtered.

I often read these verses with an uneasy feeling. The question confronts me: Am I like those jokes in Jerusalem, parading around as wise in Scripture and spiritual leaders, but blind to God's Messiah, devoid of

spiritual revival and true repentance of the heart, pandering to the powerful and popular, afraid to speak the truth, follow the truth, or even to seek it?

Who went with the wisemen to Bethlehem? The wise men followed what Scripture said and went. Where were the others? Do I go along to get along even when that means allowing sin or joining in it? Am I afraid of personal cost or time or energy to turn away from a sin in my life because that cross of self-denial would hurt? Do I shy away from committing to grow in my faith more week in and out because of laziness or because it's difficult to prioritize God and his Word with all the voices clamoring for my time? Is it love of comfort? Is it greed? Is it insecurity, wanting the world to like me causing me to shy away from confessing my faith, proclaiming God's Law and his Gospel? Do I mask it hypocritically under that guise of "keeping the peace" or "not making waves?" Would I follow the wisemen? If this attitude could take over Jerusalem, the one-time city of God, this could happen to us too at St. Paul's, to me! In faith we cry, "God help us!"

And God does. He did. He sent us a Savior. He bids us go to Bethlehem. In his Word, God brings us to Bethlehem with the wisemen. We come and our senses are shocked to see this little boy at home with his mom in Bethlehem. Through the eyes of faith worked in our heart by the Spirit through God's Word and sacrament, we see what the wisemen see – the Messiah, the King, our Savior, our Hosanna – our "God, save us." He makes us see Jesus!

"The star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him." They believed. They were strangers not just physically, but it seemed spiritually too. Yet their joy was overwhelming because God led them by His star to see the Savior. God truly wanted them, Magi, foreigners, Gentiles to see the object of their faith – a child, the Messiah! He wants you to see your Savior too, the forgiveness he has one for you and to have this same joy, to worship him.

"Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh." Through the eyes of faith they could see past the meanness of the carpenter's wife and the craziness of a humble child being God in the flesh. They worshiped him. This was the King of the Jews and **A Light for All**. Their gifts were precious items, wanted items, useful items, beautiful items, items with great meaning whether they realized it fully or not. Gold – the gift befitting a King. Frankincense – a most precious spice and aromatic resin used by priests offered up to God with the prayers of the people. Myrrh - a precious aromatic resin, used in the embalming process. Jesus would be offered myrrh mixed with wine on his way to the cross, but would not drink it to dull his senses. Nicodemus would bring it as they took Jesus' body to the tomb. Jesus is our faithful high priest who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world, your sins and mine, to bring us God's forgiveness and true peace with God. He would not go along to get along, but would stand on the truth and trust God's promises – all for us and as our perfect substitute. He won your forgiveness and peace between you and God. You are forgiven in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. Whether or not they knew the significance, these gifts hinted at just who Jesus is – King, God, Sacrifice.

"And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." Start to finish God directed their journey. From seeing the star, faith to follow, reappearance of the star to go before, arrive and stand at the house, and the warning to keep them and the boy safe – to return home another route. What emotion filled their hearts and ours having seen the star, having worshipped our Savior? Joy.

We experience a great joy in who this child is, the forgiveness and peace with God he brings, though the rest of the world is in unrest or disturbed. Start to finish God directs our journeys – bringing us to faith, guiding us through life, granting us this joy in Jesus, and calling us home. It is our great joy to come even at great expense, to persist to see our Savior, to bring him our best, our all, out of thanks and joy for who he is and what he has done and does for us. It is our Joy for Jesus is **A Light for All**. Amen.