

January 7-9, 2023 – Epiphany of Our Lord

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: What Child Is This? Jesus is:

1. A child of wonder
2. A child of sorrows
3. A child of value

Sermon Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

**1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' " 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.**

In the name of the Christ-child who humbly came at Bethlehem, dear Christian family members of St. Paul's,

By this time, you just might be all "Christmas-ed" out. The decorations in your home and in this sanctuary are about to come down. Flip through the FM dial on your car radio and you'll find very few Christmas songs jingle belling. And with school back in session, that's a sure sign Christmas is over. But, there are other indications that Christmas is out of sight and out of mind. The mood of many has returned to being numb, grumpy, or business-as-usual. That dose of Christmas kindness and goodwill has given way to complaining and an all-out-search for entertainment. And maybe, just maybe, you're ready for Christmas to be over. If that's how you feel, then listen to this. A woman was doing some after-Christmas shopping in the big city with her two small kids. She dragged them all over town, fighting the traffic, constantly looking for a parking spot, and standing in line for what seemed to be eternity trying to make Christmas returns. Battling the icy weather, the stress of Christmas finally got to her. Out of desperation, as her kids began pushing and shoving each other in a packed department store elevator, she expressed a comment she thought was on the minds of everyone else: "Whoever thought up this Christmas season ought to be shot." A small voice in the back of the elevator said: "Don't worry, ma'am. They tried to get rid of the Christ-Child. But, they didn't shoot Him. They nailed him to a tree." Talk about awkward silence.

Might, I make a suggestion, my Christian brothers and sisters. Let's make Christmas last longer. No, not the one with bargain-shopping and decoration-overload, but the one where we simply bow the knee to Jesus, our Savior and King in genuine worship. This weekend at St. Paul's, we celebrate the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas known throughout Christendom as the Epiphany of our LORD. Epiphany is just a fancy church word meaning: "to reveal." Starting today, Jesus' identity is revealed as more than just a humble baby born in a manger, but who came to earth as the strong Son of God and true Savior we each need. To the best of my knowledge, almost everyone here at St. Paul's is a gentile, a word meaning: non-Jew. Throughout this Christmas season, we've seen how the birth of Jesus impacted His Jewish neighbors, God's chosen people. But, today, at this Epiphany of our Lord, we get to see how Jesus is the Savior of ALL nations, both Jew and Gentile, that's including you and me. So on the basis of our sermon reading from Matthew, chapter two and using a familiar Christmas carol, let's answer our sermon theme: **What Child Is This?** three different ways. Jesus is a child of wonder, a child of sorrows, and a child of value

Wonderful things about the Christ-child were revealed when Magi, or "wise-men", arrived on the scene in Jerusalem about 12-24 months after Jesus was born. Let's find out what kind of wonders, as our sermon reading from Matthew, chapter 2 begins. ***1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*** Most Christmas cards we receive with a manger, puts the star neatly over the place where Christ was born. Now, whether it looked quite that symmetrical remains to be seen. What we do know is that this special star, this wonderful star led Magi, translated "wise men" to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, in search of a king. Some Bible commentators have tried to explain what this star was: a comet, or a super-nova, or an alignment of planets. But, none of these natural explanations seem to fit Matthew's description how this special star stopped directly over the house where the Holy family was living. For now, let's set aside our cold analytic investigation of this miracle and simply get lost in the wonders of what God was doing.

It's clear that this star served as a navigational tool for these Magi from the East. And it preaches a sermon about this child born in Bethlehem. I don't know of any other child in history whose birth was marked by such a unique, one-of-a-kind star. It more than just suggests. It screams that right here in Bethlehem, we have no ordinary baby boy. His greatness surpasses every human being. He's a child so wonderful that there are things about Him that go beyond our limited human understanding. Perhaps, the only thing we can do, is follow the example of the Magi: let's bow down and worship Him.

And doesn't the very presence of the Magi preach a similar message? There's a sense of mystery that surrounds these visitors from the East. Most Bible commentators agree that these were men of science, not just mystics. They were well- educated, wealthy, and highly-respected in their Gentile circles. They likely were NOT men of faith, prone to follow their feelings. They were from Persia or Babylon, which is modern-day Iran or Iraq. So how did they even know how to look for the King of Jews from this star?

Here's where it gets interesting. Consider this witness possibility. When the Jews were first exiled to Babylon years earlier in 586 BC, they carried their Old Testaments with them and shared God's Word with their Babylonian friends and neighbors. Really, I don't think it was rocket science. The Wise Men just opened their Bibles and read the

prophesies of the coming Christ. Yes, through these men, God answers the question: "What Child Is This?" Jesus IS a child of wonder. There's no other logical explanation for how this Christ-child could move non-Jews to come hundreds or even thousands of miles on a trip that took months if not years to find Him. There's something special about this child that draws them. And that wonder, that miracle is repeated today. Every time that people around the globe, yes even in New Ulm, are moved to turn from personal sin to embrace the forgiveness only found in Jesus, this Christ-child has again worked the wonder of faith. And while we haven't met the mysterious Magi, we know this Jesus. By His Holy Spirit, He's captured our hearts. And we've gathered right here, right now, from across the miles to give Him the praise and honor He deserves.

And that's why the second explanation to the question: **What Child Is This?** is harder to answer. With a lump in our throat, we answer: He's a child of sorrows. Listen as our sermon reading continues: **3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' " 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.** King Herod sounds like a good guy, doesn't he? A spiritual guy. But, despite his pious appearance, Herod is as phony as a three-dollar-bill. In history, when we think of the reputation of King Herod, think: Adolph Hitler, only more evil. King Herod was ruthless. He had his own family members killed when he thought his Israel throne was threatened. He had a standing order to kill certain Jewish citizens upon his death. And, we learned from last week's sermon reading, it was King Herod who had all the baby boys in Bethlehem killed who were under two years old, in an effort to wipe out Jesus. Murdering children? Herod would stop at nothing to eliminate any rivals. And his subjects knew it. That's why the Gospel writer Matthew reminds us: **all Jerusalem was disturbed.** Few were willing to stand up for Christ, their true King.

Do we have that same hesitation today? There are many times we might feel awkward to admit Jesus loves me to our own neighbors and friends, that studying the Bible with a group of people is a priority this new year, and we almost always get more out of serving and sharing our LORD than we ever put into it. It's much easier to take the pathway of LEAST resistance: do nothing. And we could take that path of LEAST resistance if Jesus did. But, Jesus, the child of sorrows grew up to be a man of sorrows. Even though King Herod failed at eliminating Jesus, it was only a matter of time before the Jewish leaders found Jesus, falsely accused Him, made Him suffer mercilessly with Roman soldiers mocking Him, scourging Him, spitting on Him, and finally put Him to death on a cross. Yet, the Father turned His Son's crucifixion to our advantage. Isaiah had THIS to say about the child of sorrows: **Surely He has born our griefs and carried our sorrows.** So **What Child Is This?** He's a child of sorrows whose suffering completely pays our debt of sin. Remember, Jesus came to pay a debt He didn't owe because we had a debt of sin we couldn't pay. Because He IS a child of sorrows, Jesus lifts the crushing debt of sins off our shoulders and pays this debt Himself – freely and fully. That's salvation's story living in the flesh in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Finally, Jesus is a child of value. Remember how the Magi placed high value on Jesus, their King. We find this out as our sermon reading concludes: ***"11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*** How much did these Magi value Jesus? He was more than just a passing interest or side hobby. He was more than just someone to turn to in a moment of desperation. Three things make that clear. First, they bowed down and worshiped Him. They felt so unworthy because of their personal sins, they wanted to give the Babe of Bethlehem their respect and worship. Second, they willingly gave the best of what they had: gold fit for a King, incense fit for a God, and myrrh, a spice for someone who was going to die. Finally, they were more concerned what God wanted than what they wanted. Instead of taking the easy way home, because God said so, they avoided Herod and went home a different way. My Christian friends, as we begin a new year of God's grace, I can't think of better new year's resolutions than to do what the Magi did. Come to church each week, not just out of habit or because we felt obligated, but to faithfully praise our Savior God and get lost in the wonder of His love. Second, let's give our best to God – maybe not gold, incense, or myrrh, but the best of our time, talents, and treasures to Christ our King as we remember His eternal love to save us. And let's resolve to be more obedient to Christ, not just in the church sanctuary, but to all we meet, to love others as we have been loved.

During World War 2, a man and his little boy were walking in their neighborhood at night, just after Christmas. The cold winter air blew right threw them as they admired the starry sky. They passed rows of houses, brightly lit with decorations. Several homes had stars, purposely placed in their front windows. Out of curiosity, the son asked the father why this was so. The father answered: "It means that family has a son fighting in the war." With that info, the son carefully pointed up to the night sky and said: "Look Daddy. God must have a son in the war too. He has a star in the sky." Yes, God's Son did go to fight and win the war against sin, death, and Satan. And today, He shares that victory with us. May this Epiphany season remind us that Jesus is for us. May we be Wise Men and Women who simply believe **What Child This Is – Jesus is a child of wonder, a child of sorrow, and a child of value.** And that's true whether you are in your own bed, a hospital bed, or a death bed. Amen.