

“The Epiphany of Our Lord”

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Matthew 2:1-12

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In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Centuries before the birth of Christ, the king of the great Babylonian empire, Nebuchadnezzar, had a troubling dream. He saw an image, an unusual and awesome statue made of a gold head, a silver chest, a bronze belly and thighs, iron legs, and iron and clay feet. This image was shattered into pieces by a large stone cut without hands. The stone then became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. *But what exactly did this dream mean?* None of his Magi or Wise Men could tell him what he had dreamed when he asked them, nor could they give an interpretation. And so the king became furious and gave the command to destroy all the wise men of Babylon, including also Daniel, who was among the many who had been captured from Israel and carried into exile in Babylon. However, Daniel sought help from God, so that he might understand Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and that he and his fellow companions, the wise men, might not perish.

God answered Daniel's prayer, and Daniel spoke to the king, telling him by divine revelation both what the king had dreamed and what it meant. Nebuchadnezzar, he said, was the great golden head of the image that he had seen—a king of kings on earth. And yet, his kingdom would be replaced by another, then another, and another, each successively weaker than the one before it. Until at last a great stone would crush and destroy all of them, and a new kingdom would be established forever and ever without end.

When Daniel had given this interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar fell down before Daniel, presenting an offering and incense to him, and blessing the Lord as the Ruler of all kings and the God above all gods. And he appointed Daniel as the chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon, the head of all the Magi.

Now in this position, Daniel certainly taught the wise men under him about the coming Messiah, about the Savior on whom Israel was waiting. For, of course, that stone which destroyed the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream was none other than Christ, the King of kings, whose kingdom will have no end. Daniel's wisdom centered around God's Word. And one of the prophecies that Daniel would have spoken of was this one from Numbers 24:17, **“A Star shall come out of Jacob, a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult.”**

In today's Epiphany Gospel, then, the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is fulfilled. His golden kingdom is laid low, and his gold is sacrificed and brought to Christ. Babylon is now bowing

down before the everlasting King of kings, and offers its incense to the God of Daniel. These Wise Men learned well from their forefathers who were taught by Daniel. Seeing the Star, they were reminded of the true Star and light of Israel, and they traveled to find Him who is the Savior of the world.

All of this is in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, **“Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. . . 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.”** Just as the Babylonian king bowed down to Daniel and gave him gifts, so now these Babylonian Wise Men bow down to Christ and give Him gifts.

The events of Epiphany mark an important point in history for us. For this is the first time that Jesus is revealed to Gentiles. Up to this point it had been all Israelites who had beheld our Lord: the shepherds at the stable, Simeon and Anna in the temple. But now, with Jesus at least a year old, the Gentile Wise Men come to the house where Joseph and Mary are residing and acknowledge Him to be the Lord, bowing down to worship Him and giving Him royal gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. This event shows that Christ came not only for the chosen people of Israel but for all the nations, for people of every nationality and ethnicity and race, including us. Jesus is not only the Savior of Israel but of the world. No one is held outside the salvation He came to bring because of their place of birth or skin color.

This is important to recognize. For there are even some among us here who hold disparaging and prejudiced views of people of other races. I've heard the remarks. The fact remains, however, that there is really only one race, the human race. All of us are descended from Adam and Noah. We are all related somewhere along the way on the family tree. Christ came to save that entire family tree, all of humanity. To look down upon someone simply because of race is to look down on Christ who saved that race and assumed that race into His humanity when He became man. If you don't like other races, you're not going to like heaven. For the book of Revelation describes the hosts in heaven who have been saved by Christ as people from **“all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages.”** We should judge a person, then, not by their ethnicity but by what they believe and what they do. And even then, Epiphany teaches us that unbelievers and the godless from this and every nation are a mission field, that we should speak to them of Christ, that they may receive His light.

The reality is that none of you have any claim by race to the blessings of God. None of you are Jews. All of you as far as I know are descended from heathen Gentiles. And even the Jews were not saved by their ethnicity but by their faith in Jesus the Messiah. It's only by His grace that any of us are saved. He has revealed Himself to us and caused us to hear and believe His life-giving Gospel.

That's why in the early church Epiphany, not Christmas, was the big celebration of the first part of the church year. It wasn't until a couple of centuries later, in fact, that Christmas was even established on a separate day. Epiphany is a reminder that Jesus came for each of us, out of love for every one of you, regardless of who you are. Christ is truly a Light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of the people of Israel.

Now it's interesting to note in this story the difference between the Gentile wise men and the Jewish priests and scribes. On the one hand, the Jews who possessed the Scriptures and knew the prophecies of the Messiah were greatly troubled at the thought that the Messiah was born. King Herod and all Jerusalem were shaken by this news. But why would that be? You would think they might be excited. You would think that they would want to personally escort the wise men to Bethlehem so that they could see for themselves. Instead, they quote the Scripture they know so well and do nothing. Could it be that they didn't really believe the Word of God? Could it be that it was just window dressing on a false religion of their own making? Could it be that they liked Scripture as long as it didn't rock the boat or shake up their own plans for their life or threaten the political power structure? Could it be that they had become complacent? Whatever it was, the fact is that they rejected the working of the Word of God.

On the other hand, even though the wise men probably had less of the Word of God at their disposal, it accomplished its purpose with them and led them to Christ. That is the purpose of the Word, to lead us to the Word made flesh, Jesus. While the priests and scribes were sitting in Jerusalem, all comfortable with their Bibles that they knew so well, only 10 miles away in Bethlehem, the wise men were bowing before the One to whom all the Scriptures point and lead, the Christ-child.

Have we at times become like the Jewish priests and scribes? Have we become complacent in our faith? Do we pride ourselves on our Bible knowledge rather than glorying in the One whom the Bible is all about, our Savior Jesus? Has the Word of God become window dressing for a religion of our own making or a way of maintaining the status quo? Have we stopped praying and meditating on the Scriptures in our day to day lives? God grant rather that His Word might continually accomplish its purpose of leading us to the Word made flesh, that we might be led to seek Christ out in His preaching and absolution, that just like the wise men we might come and kneel before Him week by week as he gives us His true body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. The saying is true, "Wise Men still seek Him." Those who have been made "wise unto salvation" seek Christ's saving presence in the Divine Service.

Finally, we must take note of the gifts the wise men brought. First, they gave our Lord the gift of gold. This, as we mentioned before, suggests royalty, that Jesus is a king. Second,

they gave our Lord frankincense, a particular type of incense burned in the temple for worship. This reminds us that Jesus is truly God and is to be worshiped and prayed to. It also reminds us that Jesus is the One who brings our prayers before the throne of the Father. He is our Mediator and go-between. And thirdly, they gave our Lord myrrh. This is the most striking of all the gifts. Myrrh was a type of perfume that was also used both as an anesthetic as well as to prepare a corpse for burial. This reminds us of the purpose of this Child's birth. He came to die for us. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, the soldiers offered Him wine mixed with myrrh to dull the pain. But Jesus refused it, that He might fully bear our judgment and rescue us from it completely. And then when they buried Jesus, myrrh was used as a perfume to anoint Jesus' body. Because of that, because of what Jesus has done for us, II Corinthians 2 now says that we who believe are to God **"the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved."** Perhaps the wise men didn't fully understand the significance of their gifts. But from our side of the resurrection we can see clearly that these gifts foreshadowed the redemption Christ came to accomplish for us.

Let us then rejoice this day in our Lord's Epiphany to the nations, to us Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Let us show forth the light of Christ, that others may be drawn to worship Him. And let us ever believe in and follow Him who is Himself our Bright Morning Star.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.