

Epiphany (1/6/09 – Led by the Word of God to the Incarnate Christ)

Epiphany traditionally has been one of the highest and most important festivals of the Church Year – a feast celebrated by every Lutheran congregation on its Day (like we have been doing for some years). At one time it incorporated all into one the Nativity of Our Lord, the Visit of the Magi, and the Baptism of Our Lord all in one feast. But with time the Church determined that each of those events should be remembered separately in the Church. Now for us January 6th commemorates the coming of the Wise Men, or Magi from the east, to worship the Christ-Child, and to give Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The word *Epiphany* means ‘manifestation,’ or ‘showing forth’ – a displaying of that which was hidden. So this is the day that celebrate that Christ is the Savior not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles.

So let’s recount the story again – that the Christ might be manifest to us!

It is now several months after Jesus’ birth, and Mary and Joseph are living in Bethlehem – contrary to the Christmas Cards and Pageants that show the shepherds and Wise Men visiting together at the stable. The Magi came from the east, following a star. These wise men were astrologers and priests, and they had heard of the God of Israel hundreds of years before, when the Jews were in the Babylonian captivity. At that time the prophet Daniel was placed over the Magi, and so it is likely that they learned of the coming Messiah from Daniel. It is not surprising, then, that when they see this star, they remember what their forefathers had heard hundreds of years before, and thus travel as we have heard to find the Savior of the world.

They came to Jerusalem, the capital city. It is no surprise that they went to Jerusalem. That was where the Temple was located, and they expected this newborn King to be found amidst the rulers and leaders of Israel. They went right to the top – to King Herod the Great. Herod, however, knew nothing of this Child King – at least not directly; and he was more than a little troubled by this news. Herod finds out from his chief priests and scribes that the prophet Micah had prophesied the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a little town not too far outside of Jerusalem.

Now isn’t that curious. These wise-men had a star that had led them hundreds of miles across harsh terrain so that they were within an easy day’s walk of their destination, but where do they have to go to find Jesus? To the Word of God. **Only the Word of God** could lead them to the Christ-Child. **Only the Word of God** could complete their journey, and make it into more than a “wild-goose chase.”

But the chief priests and the scribes themselves didn’t believe the Word of God.

How could they know the prophecy, give it to the wise-men, and not believe it themselves? Could it be that they were complacent? Could it be that the religious establishment in Jerusalem didn't believe their own Scriptures?

It shouldn't surprise us all that much. We do it all the time. God's Word says don't have any idols – and we put our own personal lives and fads before coming to Church. God's Word says don't gossip – and yet who among us does not just love to delve into a juicy bit of information about someone here at Church? God's Word says don't murder – and yet our nation murders millions of unborn children every year, in the pathetic name of freedom and choice ... and many who call themselves “Christians” support it. No nation in the world has more access to the Scriptures and the Word of God, but we would much rather keep the Word of God in its rightful place – namely, on a shelf ... hidden away from the eyes of the world ... hidden away from our hearts and lives. No we are not all that different from those priests and scribes. God's Word is nice when it suits our purposes, but when it crushes us for our sinful pride, well, that's just getting a bit rude, isn't it?

And perhaps even worse than that is that we don't believe it when God's Word says that God forgives us. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners – and that means you and me. Save. Do we know what that means? That means He came into the world to rescue you from the mess of your life, He came to save you from yourself ... from the world and its temptations ... and from the devil's wicked ways of twisting God's Word to say the exact opposite of what He clearly intends. The Christ-Child came to save you.

Do you believe it ... really? Only God can make that happen. Only the power of God's Word can turn your faithless heart into a heart beating for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even Herod knew what the prophecy was about. Perhaps we don't have the full picture of this man, Herod. The historians and commentators speak about a clever and capable warrior, a persuasive orator, and conniving diplomat. And Herod was one of the great builders in the history of the Jews – the greatest since Solomon. But Herod was also a man without mercy – he was cruel and calculating and jealous to the core. He was so evil that he had his brother-in-law (the high priest) drowned ... and then pretended to mourn his death at an elaborate funeral. He arranged for his own wife and three of his sons to be assassinated. And before his death, he ordered that some of Jerusalem's most prestigious citizens be confined in a stadium and left instructions for them to be shot by archers as soon as he died – just to ensure they would be mourning in Jerusalem at the time of his death. Although Herod was old and not far from death at the time of our text, it should come as no surprise, then, that he wanted to snuff out the young life of a weak and

helpless infant, if that child posed even the slightest threat to his throne.

It was, then, Herod's intention that they would find the Christ-Child and report back to him. Of course, we know the story. Herod wanted to kill this rival king, and when the wise-men went back another way, he murdered all of the male-children in Bethlehem under two years old. Herod believed that this Christ would come as a King, but Herod did not believe that Christ would come to save. Herod saw this new king as a rival, someone to take away from his power and glory. He knew the Word of God, but He didn't have the one key element that makes all the difference in the world. Faith.

It really is a mystery. These wise-men come from the east, hear the Word of God, and go to Bethlehem to worship the Son of God made flesh. The keen eyes of faith trusted the Word of God over their own judgment. Their good judgment said that the King of the Jews and Savior of the World would be in the biggest, most glorious place they could find, the Temple or the court of the King. But it wasn't so. This King came to serve the meek and lowly, not impress the high and mighty. He wasn't the son of Herod; He was the Son of God. So they heard the Word of God, and believed it – contrary to their own senses ... contrary to their worldly thinking.

Do you believe God's Word like the wise-men? Do you believe that God can forgive your sins with a word? Do you believe that God can create new life and defeat the power of Satan and hell with a few splashes of water on a baby? Do you believe that God can come hidden under simple bread and wine?

God's ways are not our ways. And try as we might, no amount of cajoling or twisting on our part makes it otherwise.

Jesus Christ came in the flesh to save all mankind. The wise-men believed this, and so they gave Him three unique gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold, which suggests royalty – since Jesus is a King. Incense, which is the smoke used in the Temple – suggesting the deity of Christ, and worship of Him. And finally, Myrrh, the most striking of all the gifts, actually – an aromatic resin used in perfume ... also used in the embalming process of a corpse and as an anesthetic. So when Jesus hung on the cross, the soldiers offered Him wine mixed with myrrh – but Jesus refused it. And when they buried Jesus, they brought burial perfumes to anoint the body. Perhaps the magi didn't know the significance of their gifts, we don't know. But from this side of the resurrection we can see clearly that these gifts foreshadowed – *epiphanied*, as it were – His great work of the King Who became a sacrifice to the point of death ... and then rose again from the dead.

Yes, *Epiphany* is a great and wonderful day. This is the day where Christ is shown to the world as the Savior of the world. So it is that we continue to preach

God's Word, and to administer His sacraments of life, to a dying and suffering world. Some will hear this message of joy, and with the magi, and Mary and Joseph, and all the company of heaven, we rejoice in the coming of this Babe of Bethlehem, Who came to die, Who came to rise from the dead, and Who comes to you even tonight in the swaddling cloths of His Word and Sacrament. Yes, there is great joy here today, for we have seen and heard the message of long ago. May it ever be heard and believed among us.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]