

01/03/21

Feast of Epiphany

Manifested to us as our divine Lord and Savior

Matthew 2: 1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

Saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, “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.*

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 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. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wednesday of this week—January sixth—is for the Church of Christ the Holy Day of Epiphany, and today—in our liturgical propers, in our hymns, and in the appointed readings—we observe that high festival of the church-year here at Old Zion Lutheran.

This is also for us the first worship-service of the New Year 2021. Once again we are reminded of the rapid passage of time—how quickly the days and weeks and months fly by us. The last year, to be sure, had its share of calamities and tragedies—forest-fires, floods, destruction caused by human evil, a raging pandemic that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in our country and which threatens to take many more. As for the New

Year ahead, we hope and pray that it will be better, that the vaccine will be distributed quickly, that the loss of life will finally slow, that there will be peace on earth, and that the suffering of the homeless and the hungry will be alleviated. We will pray diligently for the “daily bread” which we and all people need, but we also know that there really are no assurances that the coming year will bring earthly happiness to everyone.

The joyful message of this Festival Day, then, is for us a timely and needed balm for our souls. Of this we can be absolutely certain: Mary’s Son is revealed to us—“unveiled” for us in this sacred Epiphany Season—as the Son of God, the Savior born to redeem all people from sin and death. It is the goal of Christ’s Church that the truth which beams from the Epiphany Star be secured in our hearts and provide its light to us all year long.

I

In our Old Testament reading today from the Book of Isaiah, that prophet reminds us that the Epiphany star shines in a world which is covered in darkness—the pitch-black darkness of human sin and fallenness and hard-hearted rejection of what our triune God of love offers. It would be hard to find a more clearly illustrative example of that darkness than in the actions of wicked King Herod.

Matthew tells us that, when he heard that visitors from the East were inquiring about the newly born King of the Jews, Herod was troubled. He gave no thought to what Scripture teaches about the saving purpose for which the Lord’s Anointed had come, no thought to what Moses and the Psalms and the prophets said about the redemption which this King would bring, no thought at all to his own need for a Savior from sin and death. He worried only that there was now a threat to his position and his power. That is why he wanted to learn from the chief priests and scribes where the New King was to be born. That is why he sent those wise men from the East to Bethlehem and deceitfully asked them to inform him when they found the Child. In this same chapter, Matthew tells us of his murderous rage when the wise men did not return, and of his orders that every male child in Bethlehem two years old and younger should be slaughtered. That kind of unfeeling cruelty, that kind of narcissistic obsession with oneself, that kind of willingness to take the lives even of little children—that is the darkness of which the prophet speaks.

And the hard truth that Scripture teaches is that it is that spiritual darkness—that death of the soul—into which you and I were born. That is why the light of the Epiphany Star is so precious to us.

II

Those travelers from the East who followed that star are something of

a mystery to us. We sing of “three Kings,” but they were not kings at all—they were *Magi*—members of a priestly class who studied the stars. The tradition has given names to them—Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar—but in fact we do not know their names nor the country or countries from which they came. Nativity scenes picture them as three in number, but that is only a guess based on the number of different gifts which they brought. Yet we can be sure of this much—they knew of the One who was to be born “King of the Jews,” they knew that the star which they followed would lead them to this King, and they knew that this Child-King was to be worshiped. From their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, they understood that He was the Light that was to dawn in our human darkness.

The gifts which they offer to the Child Jesus indicate also that they understood much about how the Lord’s Anointed One—the newborn King of the Jews—would cause the light of His salvation to shine. They present to Him gold, fit for the King who has come to rule in our hearts. They present to Him frankincense—the aromatic incense burned in the temple as a symbol of the prayers of the people—because they understand that He has come to be our High Priest who carries all our prayers and petitions to the very heart of our Triune God. They present to Him myrrh, the pungent and spicy ointment which the Jews used in preparing the dead for burial. And with this gift, these Wise Men point forward to the cross on Calvary’s hill, where the Child of Bethlehem would one day offer His life as the sacrifice for your sin and mine. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh—with their gifts to Jesus, the wise men from the East proclaim to us what He came to do.

This, too—the saving work of God’s Son—is a theme of the Epiphany Season. The twelve-year-old Boy in the temple, we learn, has stayed behind because He must be about His Father’s business. He receives baptism from John because that is how He enters into His years of public ministry—it is His anointing as our Prophet, Priest, and King. He is transfigured on the holy mountain to reveal His true glory as He goes to serve by giving His life for us. In this world so dark with sin and death, the Church unveils Christ Jesus to us as our divine-human Savior who really does bring us light.

III

And yet another theme of this liturgical season is this wondrous truth—that Mary’s Son and God’s Son offers the light of His salvation to all people. “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” the Wise Men ask, “For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” And yet those strangers from the East did not belong to the Lord’s chosen people of Israel. They were gentiles, just as we are. But they understand that the new King of the Jews has come to be also their King, their High

Priest, their Savior from sin. That they find Jesus in faith that day reminds us of all those precious phrases in Scripture which assure us that He has come to be our King and our Savior as well—that He is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” as the Baptist cried; that He is the “propitiation for the sins of the whole world,” as St. John wrote; that His Gospel of forgiveness and life should be proclaimed to all people, as Jesus Himself commanded His disciples.

That is why the tradition has arisen among Christ’s people of faith that, during the Epiphany Season, we especially consider the Church’s mission to proclaim the Gospel of our crucified and risen Savior to all people. For us here at Old Zion, that means thinking about our mission here in our neighborhood as well as the work we do in concert with our sister-churches both here in America and in other lands. The Wise Men call us to earnest pray for our ELCM brothers-and-sisters-in-the-faith who preach and teach the Gospel-Word and who baptize in the name of the holy Trinity and who share the sacred meal of our Savior’s body and blood—not only here in America but also in India and in Myanmar. We raise our prayers for all the Church of Christ—for all those who grasp in faith the Light of His Gospel and who work to spread that Light to the people around them. Their mission, Epiphany Season reminds us, is our mission.

May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with the light of the Epiphany Star and the joy of bringing that light to others. Amen.