

Pastor Kenneth Mars
St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (members of Immanuel also present)
The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2015
Text: Matthew 2:1–12

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Most people have put Christmas out of their minds. I can't blame them. We've been inundated with Christmas music, movies, parties and celebrations since the Friday after Thanksgiving. Holiday fatigue is to be expected. And yet, here we are, at church on a Tuesday evening to celebrate another Christmas. But it's different than what we usually think.

We're still in Bethlehem but Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are no longer in the manger. They have a home, probably rented or borrowed. The shepherds are never heard from again, at least the Scriptures don't give us any more information on them. Instead of shepherds, we have Magi, Wise Men from the east; the humble manger is replaced with the improved comforts of a house. At the manger, we find Jews, the chosen children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the house, we find Jews and Gentiles together; the nations are coming to worship the Lord as prophesied by Isaiah, "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (60:3). The shepherds learned about the birth of God's incarnate Son from the angels. The Wise Men learned about the Lord's birth from a miraculous star shining in the west. You see, it's Christmas, but different. It's the Epiphany of our Lord, sometimes called the Gentile Christmas.

I find it quite interesting that all the fun stuff of Christmas really comes from the journey of the Wise Men. But we don't typically think of the Wise Men when we decorate our trees with lights and stars or when we give gifts to one another. But those are the things found in the house of Bethlehem not the manger of Bethlehem.

Who were these Magi, Wise Men, from the East? In all likelihood, astrologers from the region of Persia, modern day Iraq. They were star gazers peering into the beauty of the night sky in order to understand the events of everyday life. Sound strange? Maybe even a bit scandalous? Astrologers are brought to the Lord Jesus by means of astrology! The Jewish shepherds learned about the Lord through the preaching of angels; the Wise Men through their mystical art of astrology. Neither of them really

believed and worshipped the Lord Jesus until they actually went to Him. That's an important distinction. The angels and the star could only take their observers so far. In the end, the Lord Jesus is the one who creates faith through His Word and Spirit. That's true for the shepherds, Wise Men, the prenatal John the Baptist in his mother's womb, the 12 apostles, the apostle Paul, you, me and every Christian believer.

Stargazing was the Wise Men's own language, so to speak, something they could understand. And the Lord used it in this instance. And we mustn't forget there was that obscure prophesy recorded in the book of Numbers 24:17. It was spoken by that rather dubious character, Balaam. He said, "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." So it seems a literal but miraculous star fulfilled Balaam's prophecy. And the Wise Men saw it and journeyed to see the King born to the Jews.

The use of astrology is forbidden in Israel and the Church. We are guided by the light of God's Word. But the Lord used a star to guide the Gentiles to the Child Jesus. The Lord used flaming tongues of fire and unknown human languages to speak the good news of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost. These were one-time events, never to be repeated again. God's Word is our true and only light.

Notice too the limitation of the star. It could only take them so far. The Wise Men knew it proclaimed the birth of Israel's king. So they naturally go to Jerusalem to see King Herod. Surely he's had a son. That's human wisdom, not God's wisdom.

When they reach Herod's palace, they ask to see he who was born King of the Jews. My guess is that Herod was thinking...you're looking at him. I'm the King of the Jews. But Herod was also a shrewd politician and a megalomaniac. He needs to know what's behind these strange events so as to protect his power and status. So he calls in the chief priests and scribes to ask them where the Christ should be born. They consult the Scriptures, the prophet Micah 5:2. The Christ will be born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem.

Humble, no nothing Bethlehem. We're so used to hearing about Bethlehem. It's been romanticized in hymns and songs. "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by... (LSB 361:1); doesn't it just sound picturesque and quaint. But it really was an insignificant hovel just outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was where all the power was. Not Bethlehem.

Christmas, both the Jewish and the Gentile varieties, remind us that God works in humble, almost sneaky ways. Human history is punctuated by men and women of renown, those who possessed power or grasped it through various means. History records the exploits of the bold, the daring, the profound and wise.

But God works His infinite power and wisdom through humility and lowliness. A manger and a rented house provide shelter for the King of Kings, Lord of Lord, not a palace. Shepherds, the widow Anna, a contented and pious Simeon, righteous Joseph and Mary, a rather common couple by any standard of comparison, uncircumcised astrologers from the east, pagans by all accounts...these are the people who discover the Lord of the universe in the most unlordly of settings. Even the appearance of angels and a supernatural star invokes the snide condescension of today's powerful elite and educated intelligentsia. I can't tell you the amount of so-called scholarship which is dedicated to explaining the Star of Bethlehem in purely naturalistic ways. It was a supernova or a comet or the alignment of the planets. On the snickering goes. The powerful, the educated, and the wise of this world have not typically received or followed the humble (but divinely powerful) way of faith and salvation.

But the Wise Men followed the guidance of God's Word and the leading of this miraculous star. And they find the hope and desire of their travels: the newborn King of the Jews, the Savior of the nations, the scepter of divine royalty rising out of Jacob. Using your imagination, you can see one of the most moving scenes in all of Holy Scripture. Grown men, learned in the ways of astrology and royal decorum, bow their faces to the ground in total submission and worship. The Lord Jesus is no majestic sovereign sitting upon an exalted, golden throne located in the center of prestigious palace. He's a toddler between the ages of 1-2 ambling around on the floor at His mother's feet in a rented house in the no-nothing town of Bethlehem.

But they bow nonetheless and offer precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It appears it's the best they had to give. And so they give them in worship. The powerful bowing before the weak and lowly. That's the way the Lord works His wonders. The greatest wonder is the salvation of the world and the foundation of the new heavens and the new earth are established in the death and resurrection of God's Son.

We aren't much different from the Wise Men of so long ago. We are here tonight because the Lord has drawn us to Himself by means of His Word and Sacramental signs. The light of Christ's gospel casts its bright beams into the darkness of our sinful hearts. We are drawn to the feet of Jesus to give not gold, frankincense, and myrrh,

though we do give of our earthly possessions but we bring something more profound and life-shattering. We offer our body and soul, our reason and intellect, our emotions, and desire; we lay all that we are and ever hope to be to the feet of Jesus. Through God's Word and Sacramental signs of baptismal waters, consecrated bread and wine, and cleansing words of absolution, you are made new. In fact, the Bible calls you a royal priesthood called out of darkness into His marvelous light so that you can proclaim the excellencies of Christ's love and grace.

That what Christmas, both the Jewish and Gentile versions, is all about. God in Christ has come among us, to save us, forgive us, renew us, and bring us to Himself. His chosen means do not conform to the wisdom of this world but they are mighty unto salvation for all who receive them. Dear people of God, the light of Christ has risen upon us.

A Merry Gentile Christmas to you all. The Epiphany of the Lord shine in your hearts and minds unto everlasting joy and life.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.