

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Epiphany Festival, January 6, 2008

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Hymns: 126 (131:5) 127, 129, 130:2

Lessons: Isaiah 49:7-12; Acts 13:42-52; Matthew 13:10-17

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In Christ our Savior, fellow redeemed,

January 6th of every year is the date for the Epiphany Festival. This year it happens to fall on a Sunday. It is one of the oldest festivals celebrated in the church. Epiphany means manifestation and refers to the manifestation of Jesus as the Savior of the Gentiles. Epiphany has been called the Christmas of the Gentiles. This is an interesting thought, for we are Gentiles, not Jews. It is a fine thing to celebrate Christmas again on the Epiphany Festival, for the festival is not spoiled by worldly ways of celebrating as at Christmas time.

Today we're going to learn about the first Gentiles to worship Jesus,

THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

- 1. They had to deal with a wicked king and a people who were unaware of the birth of their Messiah.**
- 2. God led these Gentiles to Jesus and they worshiped him.**

The place and time of Jesus' birth is given in our text, "*Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod.*" Bethlehem was a little village in Judea. Jesus' birth took place there in the time of King Herod. This was the fulfillment of a prophecy that Jacob spoke, "*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs,*" Genesis 49:10. This remarkable prophecy states that at the time when the promised Messiah would be born, the ruling power would be taken out of the hands of the king of the Jews. When Jesus was born, a wicked man by the name of Herod was ruling over Judah. Herod was not a Jew, but a stranger from Edom, whom the Romans had made king of the Jews. The Romans had given the name "Herod the Great" to this man. He was not a great man, but his wickedness was great. He was cruel and ruthless in exercising his power as ruler. He had ten wives. He caused three of his sons to be put to death. He also was the one who ordered the innocent children of Bethlehem to be murdered because he thought that Jesus would be among them. But Herod, who was guided by Satan, did not succeed in his plan to get rid of Jesus, for according to God's plan Jesus was to be manifested to the Gentiles.

At this time when Herod was king of the Jews, our text says, "*Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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.'*" The Magi were wise men from some land east of Palestine, perhaps Babylonia. We do not know how many wise men there were. The idea of three of them comes from the three gifts given to Jesus. We also have to reject the idea that they were kings. The song, which says, "We three kings of Orient are..." goes according to legend, not according to the Bible. They were indeed wise men learned in the sciences, notably astronomy and astrology.

So it is not unusual that a star which they saw in the land they came from should lead them. They were led to Jerusalem by the star. They said they were looking for "*the one who has been born king of the Jews.*" They expected to find the king in Jerusalem where they thought a king would rule. Their arrival was made

known to King Herod. ***“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”*** It is not difficult to understand that Herod, the heathen wicked king of the Jews, should be disturbed by this news of another king of the Jews, for he was king of the Jews. He did not know anything about the promised Messiah of the Jews who was indeed to be the spiritual King of Israel. He was only concerned very deeply with the thought of having a rival king who might take away his ruling power.

What is surprising is that ***“all Jerusalem”*** was troubled also at this news. For nearly 4,000 years the Lord had been prophesying of the coming of the Messiah. Through the various prophets he had foretold where and when Jesus would be born. Here, strangers, Gentiles from a land far away, were inquiring about the newborn king of the Jews, and the Jewish people in Jerusalem were not aware of his birth. It is indeed a shame and disgrace to the Jewish people that their promised Messiah was born in their midst and they had to learn of it from strangers. When they did find out, nothing is said about any Jews going to Bethlehem to see their Messiah. This happened to the Jewish people because the majority of them had forsaken the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Their learned scribes, teachers of the law, knew about the Law of Moses. Their religious leaders were experts in the traditions of the fathers. But the really important truths of the Gospel of the promised Messiah had long been erased from their minds. This shows us what can and does happen to people when the Word of God is neglected and they no longer hear the preaching of the Gospel. It should be a sharp reminder to us that it can happen here also in this so-called enlightened country. It should be an admonition to us, not to forsake the Scriptures at home or in church.

Even though King Herod was wicked and the Jewish people were spiritually lax, **God led these Gentiles to Jesus and they worshiped him.**

2.

King Herod was not interested in helping the Wise Men from the East to find their Savior, but he was very much interested in finding the newborn King of the Jews so that he might do away with him. ***“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.”*** The high priests were the Jewish religious leaders. A high priest was to hold his office as long as he lived, but the Romans arbitrarily set up whom they wanted in this office. So our text speaks of ***“chief priests”***, more than one in number. The teachers of the law were also called Scribes. Nothing is said of any Elders present at this meeting, though they were included in the Sanhedrin, the highest religious court of the Jews.

It is to be noted that King Herod asked ***“where the Christ”*** was to be born. The word Christ means the Anointed One, the promised Messiah. The Jewish members of the Sanhedrin knew the answer from the Scriptures. ***“In Bethlehem in Judea’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written: “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.””*** Bethlehem was not a large city, only a small one, but out of it would come the promised Messiah. In the Old Testament times the prophet Micah had foretold that a descendant of King David from the tribe of Judah would be the promised Messiah. So Bethlehem of Judah was indeed an important city in Judah. This promised Messiah would be the spiritual Shepherd of the people of Israel.

In order to carry out his wicked intentions concerning the spiritual King of the Jews, we are told, ***“Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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.’”*** They were to make a **careful** search for the child. Herod wanted accurate information about Jesus. He wanted to know how old this child was. He said he also wanted to worship Jesus. That was a lie, and it shows us the hypocrisy of this wicked man. Actually, he wanted to murder Jesus whom he considered a rival for his throne.

Now we hear of how the Lord led the Wise Men to Jesus. ***“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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.”*** They were in a strange land but the Lord by means of a star led them to the exact location of the Christ Child. We can hardly imagine how happy they were. We don’t have to search for some scientific explanation of what happened. The star that guided the Wise Men was a wonderful miraculous star that the Lord had prepared. That is all that we in simple Christian faith need to know. What the Lord had done filled the hearts of the Wise Men with the most intense delight and joy to see how the Lord brought them to their destination. On a clear night there would be hundreds of stars twinkling in the skies above Bethlehem. But the Lord guided the Wise Men with a star that hung so low that it pointed out the very house where Jesus was. When we hear of it we say with the psalmist, ***“Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory,”*** Psalm 72:18-19.

Something that is mistakenly said or pictured at Christmas time is that the Wise Men saw Jesus in the manger where he was born. Our text makes it clear that Jesus was now in a house in Bethlehem. ***“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.”*** How old Jesus was at this time is not known and we don’t have to know his age. What is emphasized in our text is what the Wise Men did. These were mighty men, often in the presence of kings in the land they came from. When they came to Jesus, they saw nothing that would indicate that he was King. And the house they saw was no doubt a very humble dwelling, for Joseph and Mary were poor people. But the Wise Men bowed down and worshiped the little Child Jesus. Note carefully, they didn’t worship Mary also, as we might expect Roman Catholic people to think. They make so much of Mary with their rosary prayers that the Lord Jesus is not given the proper honor.

“Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.” These were precious gifts that were entirely appropriate for Jesus the spiritual King of the Jews. When we think of what our Savior did for us to redeem us from all our sins, from eternal death and damnation in hell, no gifts would be too good. Knowing of the poverty of Mary and Joseph and how they after this visit of the Wise Men had to flee to Egypt, these gifts would be very useful.

Our text tells us how God prevented the wicked King Herod from getting information from the Wise Men. ***“Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”***

With all his power King Herod did not succeed in getting information from the Wise Men. God guided the Wise Men so they did not return to tell King Herod where they had found the Christ Child. In addition, later on God commanded Joseph to take Mary his wife and the Christ Child away from Bethlehem to Egypt. They lived there until King Herod was dead.

We have learned what can happen to a people who forsake God’s Word. Now, from how God guided the Wise Men back to their own land on another route, we can also learn what great blessings come to those who hear and heed God’s Word. God the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel Word to create a child-like faith in the hearts of those who hear his Word. With such faith we accept the great blessings that God has given us through Jesus Christ his Son who redeemed us. What greater blessing can come to us than that we learn from the Gospel of God’s great love for us poor sinners and how Jesus atoned for our sins by his suffering and death and the shedding of his holy, precious blood! Paul tells us about this blessing through Christ: ***“God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross,”*** Colossians 1:19-20. For this blessing given to us for Jesus’ sake and made ours by faith, we thank God and give all glory and honor to him. Amen.