

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sunday after New Year's Day, January 4, 2009

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Hymns: 127:1-3, 131:1-2, 130, 126, 127:4-5.
Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12
Text: Matthew 2:1-12
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Why do people give gifts? Many give gifts purely out of love, to share, to show love for one another or even to show love for their God. Many give gifts to share the bountiful gifts that God has given to them. Some give gifts to fulfill obligations or create obligations. Some give gifts to show appreciation for what someone has done for them.

God, of course, gave men gifts. His most important gift is Jesus Christ, and the gift of everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus' coming made clear God's open door policy to all peoples, including people who were not among God's first chosen people, the Jews. This morning again let us review

THE LESSON OF THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

- 1. They searched diligently for the Savior.**
- 2. They followed what God says in His Word.**
- 3. They gave of their best to the Savior.**

Scripture says that "*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod*", wise men, "*Magi from the east came*", to worship and to give Jesus gifts. Herod the Great is the king scripture talks about. There is no evidence that these magi were only three in number or that they were kings or even that they traveled by camel. These pictures come to us from tradition, which has even given names to the wise men. Nor is there any detail of the age of Jesus. Jesus was a "child".

The wise men had seen the star that signaled Christ's birth and they traveled to Judea to seek the newborn King of the Jews. They arrived some time after His birth, not the very night in which he was born. When Herod sent them to Bethlehem, the star reappeared and led them to the Christ child. These wise men, Gentiles, were students of the nighttime skies. Scholars speak of these men as being learned in astronomy. Some people think that they were practicing astrology, which is the false science of supposedly foretelling the future, or knowing what will happen in a person's life by studying the sky but astronomy is the correct choice for believers. Luther compares them to the philosophers in Greece, the priests in Egypt, or the professors in the universities of his day. The word Magi means wise men, or even a 'magician' or sorcerer. This Greek word comes from a Persian word for men who were experts in the study of the stars. The fact is that they were Gentiles who came to worship Jesus. Their coming also showed God's power over human rulers and His ability to protect Jesus.

They were in the east when they had seen this star. They came "*to Jerusalem*". They assumed that a king would be found in the capital city. But they didn't find the newborn king they were looking for in Jerusalem. They didn't rely on human wisdom and give up. Instead they asked "*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east*".

Various human explanations of the unique star have been offered. Among the human explanations is that the planets Saturn and Jupiter had traveled through the sky so that they appeared to be joined at about this time. This is what is commonly called “a conjunction of planets”. But Matthew described one star – a special star. God used His heavenly creation to introduce His eternal Son to earth. Thus began God’s greatest miracle – providing our salvation through Jesus. We must recognize that this was a star specially created for this purpose. Calling this star a ‘conjunction of planets’ is an example of men explaining away God’s miracle. Man isn’t willing to give God credit for much of anything. Man wants to understand things and explain them. If Scripture speaks of ‘a star’ believers must be content to believe that this was exactly what God says it was: one star which had special movement and direction. We dare not take away from the miracle God used to lead these Gentiles to Jesus.

These wise men ***“have come to worship him.”*** Scripture says ***“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”*** Herod had his power from the Romans, but he was a king in a religious nation and had to give the impression of being religious. He didn’t want anyone standing in his way. One historian tells us that Herod even killed his own sons. He wanted no one to challenge his power and authority. He surely saw his future in jeopardy if there were someone born to be a king whom he didn’t know about. His irrational fear led him to later murder all children two years of age and younger in Bethlehem after the wise men didn’t return to him.

But why was ***“All Jerusalem”*** troubled? Could there have been fear of bloodshed and trouble with the Romans if there were a new king, one who had not been appointed by and ruled for the Romans? If there were a different king, those in Jerusalem who held positions of authority could see their jobs in jeopardy. Just as there are people today who hold their jobs because of the authorities in power at a particular time, so too in Herod’s time this was true. What if a new king had been born and was being hidden until he should be old enough and powerful enough to challenge Herod as king? Many people had reason to be concerned if some new king should claim the throne, fight and take over the throne from Herod. Because Herod was disturbed, ***“he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law”***. It was the ***“teachers of the law”***, called ***“scribes”*** in the KJV whose job it was to make copies of the Scriptures, to classify the law and to interpret the law. We might compare them to our Supreme Court, whose job it is to interpret the laws after Congress makes the laws. We know from examples in the New Testament that the interpreters of the law had gone far beyond what God teaches. They were among those who honored God with their lips and words but not with their hearts and lives. Being outwardly religious, Herod went to those who knew the Old Testament writings. And ***“he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “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.””*** They discovered the facts. Perhaps they had to do some studying to find this out. But they discovered where this was to occur, in Bethlehem of Judea, a small town about 5 to 8 miles south of Jerusalem.

“Then Herod called the Magi secretly”. Herod didn’t really trust anyone. He secretly tries to make a deal with the Wise Men. Herod first ***“found out from them the exact time the star had appeared”***. This may indicate that the star had not appeared constantly as they journeyed to find the Savior. They may have lost sight of it as they came toward Jerusalem. They may not even have seen the star since they left their home far away. But the star had led them to the land of Judea. ***“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.”*** Was someone trying to hide a new king from him? Herod tries to deceive them into thinking that he wants to worship the new king. We know, however, about his deception. We know what his real plans are. He intends to kill anyone who might get in his way.

The priests and scribes quote the scriptures. And it is the scriptures – God’s Word – which the wise men follow. Surely they had acquired some human wisdom by studying nature. But how do they find the Savior?

They learn where to find the Savior from the Word of God. It is only through the Word of God that anyone can find the Savior from sin. It is the Word of God that leads these men learned in the ways of this world to that savior. From nature we can know our sinfulness and God's power. It is only from the Word of God, the Bible, that we can learn a way to take away that sinfulness; that we can learn of our Savior. After they learned that this king was to be born in Bethlehem, they followed God's guidance to Bethlehem. The Jews searched the scriptures, and they found the answer in the scriptures. Then why weren't others going to Bethlehem to search for that king? Could it be that they didn't want to find the Savior-King? Isn't that the case today with many people? They don't want to find salvation. They don't want to find relief from their sins. They don't want to find peace with God because things in this world are so much more important to them.

Herod's plan was in place. He sends them to Bethlehem. This is the king who told them he wants to worship the new king. They probably said, "Yes, we will come and tell you, so that you can worship him too." The word "**worship**" is a key word. The wise men were going to worship the Savior. Whom do men worship? Our sinful flesh wants us to worship things which God has created, but these men came a long distance to worship a king. They knew this was a divine king they were worshipping. But did you notice there is no mention of them worshipping Herod the king!

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 house where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. The star reappeared – truly a miracle! They rejoiced because in following that light, it was leading them to the true light for all men, Jesus Christ. "***On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him***". When Jesus was born, he was laid in a manger, telling us he had been born in a stable or a barn. Mary would have been required to stay in Bethlehem for at least 40 days, according to the time of the Old Testament ceremonial purification. The fact that Herod ended up slaughtering all children two years of age and under also suggests that this visit from the wise men was some period of time after Jesus had been born.

The first thing the wise men, the magi, do is to worship him! Worship begins in the heart. You know that you don't need a temple, or a cathedral, or even a large or fancy church to worship in. You can worship wherever you are, even simple, humble places. But we find special joy in gathering together with others to worship our God, whatever the location. We can gather in worship wherever we find fellow confessors of Christ. But we will want even our humblest places of worship to reflect our love for God and the great gifts he gave us. "***Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.***" These were gifts of great value. They didn't just give the Savior any old gifts. They had obviously given a great deal of thought and value to the gifts they wanted to give to the Lord. Much has been made of the significance of the gifts, such as gold for a king, frankincense and myrrh as perfumes in preparation for his death and burial. The important thing is that they gave him gifts, valuable gifts, which are examples of gifts which reflect God's gift to men.

"And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. God instructs the wise men again, in a dream, warning them to stay away from Herod. You know, of course, Herod's reaction. After he found out he had been deceived or tricked by the wise men, he slaughtered children.

In this lesson of the Gentile wise men coming with gifts to Jesus, let us remember that the greatest gift of all is the most important lesson. Jesus, God's very son, gave up his life so that we might live eternally simply by believing in him! That is the greatest gift ever! These, the first Gentiles to worship Jesus Christ after his coming to earth, searched diligently for the Savior. They gave of their best to the Savior. They followed what God says in His Word. May their actions become our lives! Amen.