

EPIPHANY - A REVELATION OF GOD'S GRACE

MERRY CHRISTMAS, GENTILES!

Our text for the Epiphany of Our Lord is today's Gospel Lesson. From the 2nd chapter of Matthew we listen again to verses 1 & 2.

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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."

Fellow-Believers in Christ, My Dear Fellow-Gentiles,

MERRY CHRISTMAS, GENTILES!

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word Gentile as *"a person who is not Jewish."* I think it's pretty safe to say that most of us are not Jewish. If we are not Jewish, that means we are Gentiles. The term 'Gentile' is an operative word today, because the festival we celebrate this morning, Epiphany, is also known as the "Gentile Christmas."

With the Festival of The Epiphany of our Lord, we begin the Epiphany Season. Epiphany is a word that is used to describe a manifestation, an appearance, or a revelation. During the Epiphany Season, we see how Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, was revealed, on many occasions, to be the Messiah, the divine Son of God and Savior of the world.

Today we consider the familiar account of the wise men visiting the young child Jesus. These wise men, also known as Magi, were Gentiles. They were considered by many Jews of the day, to be outside of the group defined as "God's Chosen People." Yet, they didn't make this trip to study the movement of a star, they didn't make this trip to study the everyday life of the Jewish people. They came with one purpose, to worship the Christ, the promised Savior. And in doing so, they became the first Gentiles, the first non-Jewish worshipers, of Jesus Christ. That's why Epiphany is sometimes called the "Gentile Christmas," because it was the first New Testament occurrence of Gentiles worshipping the true God.

Today, we learn of God's EPIPHANY: A Revelation of God's Grace. We see that God reveals his grace in his Word and in our lives.

Ah yes, the Three Wisemen . . . There is the widely accepted idea that there were three Magi. This comes from Matthew's mentioning of three gifts, gold, incense and myrrh. In truth, we don't know how many Magi came to visit Jesus. There were at least two and maybe many more. Another misconception is seen in the depiction of the Magi worshipping the baby Jesus along with the shepherds in Bethlehem's stable. Luke's Gospel tells us that the shepherds visited the baby Jesus on the night of his birth. Matthew's account tells us that, by the time the Magi reached the city of David, Jesus, Joseph and Mary were living in a house and no longer in the stable where Jesus was born.

What we do know is that the Magi were a class of people who existed for centuries in what is now Iran and Iraq. The Magi were an educated class of people, very learned. They were involved in politics and in religion. They collected and studied the writings of all the religious systems of their day. And they were involved in the sciences, in chemistry, mathematics and astronomy.

During the Babylonian Captivity of the Jewish nation, about 600 B.C., the young captive Daniel (of lion's den fame) was appointed head over the Magi. (Daniel 2:48). Through the influence of Daniel and other Jewish captives, the Babylonian Magi heard the prophecies that a Messiah would come from the nation of Israel. They were probably familiar with the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. In one of those books, Numbers, Balaam the soothsayer is recorded as prophesying:

*"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel . . .
A ruler will come out of Jacob."* (Numbers 24:17-19).

From the time of Daniel until the time of Jesus, it was the Magi and the Jewish people who chose to remain behind in Babylon who kept contact with Israel. And so with this background, it is understandable that God would choose to inform the Magi of Babylon about the birth of his son. In his own way (and we don't know how), God used a special star to let these wise men know that a special king had been born.

Now, it's obvious the Magi didn't have all the facts. Their faith and their understanding were limited and incomplete. God used a star, a sign they could see, a sign they could follow, to lead the Magi to see his glory revealed. God led the Magi straight to Jerusalem, the capital city. As they went along, they inquired about the birth of the new king. What must have puzzled the Magi is that everyone in Jerusalem seemed to be in the dark concerning the birth of a king.

So the Magi went to the palace of the king, King Herod. Where else would you go to find a new born king? King Herod was disturbed, to put it mildly, at the news that a new king had been born. Herod was a ruthless tyrant. He had even ordered the murder of his own family members to preserve his place on the throne. He summoned the chief priests and scribes and asked them, "Where is the Anointed One, the Messiah to be born?" They gave a quick answer to the Magi's question: "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.'*"

So, how did the Magi find Christ? These Magi left their homes seeking truth in a star. The star didn't provide all the answers. God's Word did. Theirs was a simple faith, established and solidified by God's Word. God was patient with these men. He blessed them. His Word provided them with all the answers they needed. The Lord graciously led the Magi to see the truth. He led them to his Holy Word. And then he led them to see that Word fulfilled, the Word made flesh.

God longs to lead you into his Word every day, so that you can grow in your faith and understanding. The Word of God is an epiphany, a revelation, in itself. It reveals God's grace, his undeserved love for you. And this is something that has to be revealed. You would never discover God's grace, God's plan for your salvation on your own. 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 (NIV) . . . *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.* God continues to reveal his grace in his Word, telling us that all our sins were laid on Jesus, our punishment fell on him. Because of Christ's payment for our sins we are now forgiven children of God.

The Magi are obscure figures. We don't know how many there were, we don't know their names, we don't hear about them ever again in the Bible. But we do know one important fact. The Magi were foreigners. They were not of the nation of Israel. They were Gentiles. Remember the angels' message to the shepherds on Christmas Eve? *I bring you good news of great joy which will be for ALL people.* ALL people. The baby of Bethlehem was born not just for the nation of Israel but for all people. The faithful believer Simeon who earlier had held the baby Jesus rejoiced and said, *"My eyes*

*have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of **all people**, a light for revelation to the **Gentiles** . . .”*

The Magi were Gentiles, they traveled those many miles for one purpose, to worship the Christ, the promised Savior. They were the first Gentiles to bow the knee before Jesus. But they weren't the last. As the Apostle Paul related in our second reading today, he needed a special revelation from God to realize that *“Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”* The young child Jesus meant salvation not only for believers within the nation of Israel, but also for the Magi and for all the rest of us Gentiles who come to faith through the working of the Holy Spirit.

God has revealed his grace to us, so that we might know him and find salvation through him. What an epiphany this biblical account affords to our lives! Just stop and consider the blessing God's revealed Word is in your life. Without God's Word, there is no guidance or comfort. With God's Word there is peace now through sins forgiven and confident assurance of everlasting life. God's Word reveals his grace to us. And when God's Word reveals his grace it shows in our lives.

Herod was preoccupied with maintaining absolute power in his own little world. He wasn't seeking the Messiah as the wise men were. It doesn't appear that he had given any thought to the Messiah until the Magi appeared in the city. Once it was brought to his attention, Herod became enraged. This Messiah was the one who was prophesied to be born the king of the Jews. The long-awaited Messiah was mistakenly thought to be the one who would make the country strong again, militarily. He was mistakenly thought to be the one who would rid their land of oppressive foreigners. Herod mistakenly thought that the one everyone in Judea had been waiting for - promised by God -- was born to take Herod's place. He didn't like that too much. In fact he was quite troubled about it. This revelation had an impact on Herod. He went on a mad killing spree ordering the death of all baby boys two years old and younger.

God's grace revealed his Son, the Savior of the world, to the Magi. This was their epiphany. Unlike Herod, the Magi truly wanted to worship the Messiah King. God led them to realize that they had wealth beyond their wildest dreams. It wasn't the gold, frankincense, or the myrrh. No. Their greatest treasure was Jesus Christ, the light of the world. That treasure moved them to share their other treasures in worship to the Lord.

When God's Word reveals his grace it shows in our lives. God's grace leads us to be more like the Magi, to have that same desire to worship the King with sincerity and show the love that's in our hearts in the gifts we bring to the Lord. After all, Jesus is the king. We give of ourselves because we know God first gave himself for us. And so we open up the treasures of our lives and offer them in humble service to our Savior. It's been said, ***“You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.”*** God has proven that to us. He gave himself to us because he loves us. God's love is revealed in his Word. And his love is reflected in our lives as we worship him with our lives.

You're here today to do what the Magi did, worship Christ the Lord. You don't see a little child, but through the eyes of faith, you know that your Savior Jesus, is present with you through Word and Sacrament, just as he was present with those Magi so long ago. And while you have gifts to offer, be it financial gifts or the giving of your time and talents in service to him, he has even better gifts to give to you, gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, gifts that beat gold, incense, and myrrh any day of the week!

Just as God revealed the identity of the Christ child and his location to those Magi through his Word, today he reveals Christ Jesus and what he has done for you through the preaching of his Word.

Without Jesus there is no hope, no light, no life. With him there is joy and there is peace in this life and an eternity with him in heaven, even for us Gentiles.

So many people today need to know Jesus. By your life as a child of God, by your public walk with Christ, his light shines into a sin-darkened world. By your words of witness, the simple sharing of your faith, his message is conveyed to those who need to know him. Like that star of old, you can point others to the Christ child, so that they too may come and worship him. And to God be the glory! Amen.