

Near and Far

Matthew 2:1-12

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

January 10, 2016 – The Epiphany of Our Lord



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. As of today, Christmas is now officially 16 days behind us. So, why are we celebrating the arrival of the Magi to worship this newborn King so long “after the fact?” Well, the reason people wonder about this is because we each have firmly fixed in our mind’s eye an image of what that first Christmas must have looked like – including, of course, a visit from the Magi. Truth be known, the visit of the Magi on Christmas is really nothing more than a pious legend – the same pious legend, by the way, which tells us that the Magi were three in number – and even gives us their names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. The word “Magi” indicates that these men were probably astrologers of some sort – seers from the East who had brought with them gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to give to the Infant, Jesus.

Because of this, it’s hard to find a manger scene anywhere that doesn’t have the three “wise men” huddling near the bedside of Jesus, giving their gifts and proper worship to this One who was born King of the Jews. The truth, however, is that the Magi were not present with our Lord on the night of His birth. Indeed, they didn’t even start out on their journey to find Him until sometime after He was born – at a time, as Matthew informs us in the 11th verse of this morning’s Gospel, when Mary and Joseph were already living in a house. In addition, we don’t know how many of these Magi there were. There may have only been three, but there could have been an entire caravan. And finally, it’s also highly doubtful any of them were kings, but rather men who studied astrology and made their living, as it were, “reading the stars.”

Now I’m not saying this to destroy any picture you may have had concerning the night of Jesus’ birth. Indeed, the presence of the Magi in the manger has become an integral part of most people’s celebration of this Season. So feel free to enjoy singing “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” But as you sing it, don’t forget to marvel at the way in which Jesus’ birth took the whole world captive. If you put the visit of the Magi into its proper context, you’ll soon rightly understand the true meaning and significance of the Epiphany.

Today, I’d like you to note the contrasts that exist between the visitation of the shepherds by the angels on Christmas Eve, and this visit of the Magi which we celebrate during the Epiphany season. In the case of the shepherds, we see how the Gospel first came to those who were near. St. Luke writes: “There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night.” In the shepherds Jesus comes to those who were near, that is to say, to the Jews, our Lord’s own kinsmen.

On that first Christmas God announced His Son’s birth not to top-level dignitaries or theologians, but to lowly shepherds who were completely undeserving of receiving such a splendid, Divine revelation as this. Shepherds, in Jesus’ day, were poor, dirty, borderline outcasts from society – men who spent most of their life living outdoors with their sheep. This fact is important if you’re to correctly understand the true name of this Child who was born in Bethlehem as King of kings and Lord of lords. Our Lord Christ doesn’t humble Himself by reaching down to the most exalted of men – lowly as they might be in comparison to His heavenly glory and splendor – rather, He comes all the way down, and numbers Himself among the common and the ordinary – those who have little status in the eyes of the world.

As you might expect, there’s an application for us here. St. Paul writes: “you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called.” In other words, in these shepherds we see ourselves – often very near to Jesus and His Word, yet, wholly undeserving of His presence in our lives. We are those to whom, and for whom, Jesus has come – as He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. Truly not many of us are wise according to the flesh, not many are mighty, and not many are noble. Yet still, by God’s grace – as *The Small Catechism* reminds us – we have been “called by the Gospel, enlightened with His gifts, sanctified and kept in the One True Faith.” Though we were near the Gospel, and blessed to live in a land where this Gospel has been freely proclaimed, it was nonetheless God’s choice to draw us near to Himself through the shed blood of His own dear Son who came to save sinners such as ourselves.

The presence of the shepherds on Christmas Eve, then, is a wonderful sign of God's grace to those who are near to Him – a sign which says it doesn't matter who you are, how important you are, or how respected you are in the eyes of the world. No matter your standing, the Good News is that God has sent His Son into the world *for you* – to save *you* from His wrath and condemnation – to take away the guilt of *your sin* – and to love *you* with an everlasting love. In comparison, as we look at the Magi, we see that the Gospel not only extends itself to those who are nearby, but also to those who are far away. We might even say that this Gospel comes *especially* to those who are least likely to hear and receive it. The Magi weren't nobles from the East who had come to visit another noble. They were pagans who had been touched by the universal outreach of the Gospel of this King who was born beneath the Star in Bethlehem.

Oftentimes we have in our heads a picture of who it is to whom this Gospel ought to apply. And unfortunately that picture often doesn't include those who are unlike us. I've jokingly suggested before that, while Jesus wasn't German by birth He most certainly was a Lutheran. And while I firmly believe our Lord's theology is accurately reflected in the doctrines of the Lutheran Church – which is why I'm a Lutheran – and why I hope you're a Lutheran – this comment nonetheless betrays the way we often think of our Lord – which is to say we have a tendency to remake Him in our own image. We like to cast Him into a mold that looks most like us – and in some ways then we tend to define just how far His love and grace toward the people of the world ought to extend.

I have no doubt that many who lived nearby in Bethlehem were probably appalled by the visit of these strangers from the East. After all, they were Persian astrologers – rank pagans! They had no right to stand in the presence of the King of the Jews! As the Apostle Paul would later say, they were “without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise – having no hope, and without God in the world.” Yet, as the Scriptures declare, these men were there because they sought to worship this newborn King – not by right, but by Divine summons – according to the grace of God which radiates from this Child who later would suffer and die on a Cross made of wood in the darkness of sin's night. These men who “once were far off were brought near {to God} by the blood of Christ.” So, while those nearby who witnessed the coming of these Eastern sages may have been aghast at their presence, they were also called to see them in

a different light – in the Light of Christ, whose will is that all might be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

In the shepherds and the Magi, then, what we see is that the salvation of Christ is intended for those who are both nearby and far away. The Gospel is universal in the sense that Jesus' death on the Cross and His work of taking away sin's guilt and condemnation is intended for all mankind. God's Son came into our world, was born, died and rose again for every man, woman and child – those you see nearby, and those on far distant shores. As the Magi were once led by a star to visit God's Grace Incarnate in Christ, so also today the Word of the Gospel still continues to go forth, bringing the incalculable blessings of the Cross and work of Jesus to all, who by faith, will receive and believe it.

To that end, the Child of Bethlehem has put His Word and life-giving Gospel into the Church's hands – of which you are an invaluable part – having been grafted into the Vine by the Vine itself. “I am the Vine,” says Jesus. “You are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.” Though this message of life and hope in the wounds of Christ has been proclaimed worldwide for many thousands of years, a majority of this world's hurt, lost, wandering people still wait. In spite of the fact that God takes pleasure in the death of no man, much of our world is still without Christ – many are strangers to God's covenant of promise – having no hope, and without God in the world. Still the Good News is that the Light *has* come, the Light *has* dawned, the bright beams of God's grace *have* pierced the darkness of our sin – a darkness which “will never be able to put out the Light.”

On this day when we observe the Feast of the Epiphany – this Day on which we celebrate anew the revelation of God's Light in the Person of His Son – I pray that our great giver-God might grant you eyes to see the people of our world in a new and different light – to know that this Gospel isn't only for you, but for all who are both near and far away. I pray God might give you a burning passion to be a bearer of this Good News to others – to be an instrument through which God's message of forgiveness, grace and eternal life is carried out into the whole world. And God, His Holy Spirit enabling you by the power of His Word – poured over you in Baptism, spoken into your ears, and eaten with your mouth – will strengthen and preserve you to that end for the sake of His Son and the well-being of His kingdom. In the name of Jesus. Amen.