

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
Epiphany of our Lord  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012

The first Christmas included the first choir of angels singing about the birth of the Savior. Then came the first worshippers of the new born King... the shepherds who were tending their flocks by night. Before the shepherds worshipped, before the angels sang, a census was taken by Caesar Augustus which put Mary and Joseph in the town of Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. That was a first. And now, at our celebration of Epiphany, sometimes called the Gentile Christmas because today we recognize those Magi coming with gifts in hand to worship the King, we hear about another first. They were not of Jewish descent which makes it all the more strange that they were looking for a Jewish king. These wise men were the first Gentiles to bow down before the King of all kings with gifts in hand.

Where do you go to find a king? Well the Magi went to the only place where a king might be – Jerusalem. There they found a man called Herod and asked him where this new king was and, like we might expect, he did not take the news well. Herod was the king (not really, but that is what he called himself). He was the ruler of the Jews sitting on his throne in the most important city of the land. Herod didn't want to hear about another king, and an infant at that. By the way, Herod himself wasn't even a full-fledged Jew. His mother was the daughter of an Arab sheik and his father was an Edomite.

You see Herod was put to power by the Romans, mostly because he loved to remodel places like Jerusalem, its most Holy Temple and also Caesarea, named after Caesar Augustus whom he befriended. Such work for the sake of Rome earned him the title of "The Great." Herod did his best to make Augustus happy but was at the same time an absolute "madman".

He was vicious, cruel and a paranoid ruler. He put to death his own wife and three of his own sons out of fear that they would take his throne. It was totally "in character" for Herod to slaughter the babies and two-year-olds of Bethlehem in an effort to stop the prophesied "king of the Jews." The chief priests and the scribes would tell Herod that this visit from the Magi was not some fluke. The Word of God mentions the young King the Magi came to see: "*And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.*" Herod must find out more. He summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. Then he told them to go look for the child and "when you find him, send word to me so I too can go and worship him." The deceptive words of a madman who wanted nothing more than to get rid of the newborn king so that his current reign would remain intact.

As I think about how that meeting between the Magi and Herod went, I wonder what Herod thought when we saw these distinguished gentlemen come before him with treasure fit for a king. I wonder, if Herod thought, "Is that for me? How kind of you." But when he found out that it was not for him, his anger grew. Herod believed that he was the one who deserved the treasure. He was the king. Treasure is for the treasured king – and no one was more deserving than Herod. How could there be one more deserving of such grand gifts than him?

Herod wanted to be the object of adoration. He wanted to be the recipient of all the treasure. He wanted to be top dog. He looked out for number one and that number one was none other than himself.

We might think there is no way we would ever go to the selfish extent of Herod in anything we do. Yet, I would contend that selfishness is one of those sins that trip up Christians as much as any other. Now, we may not murder in a paranoid rage, but we would and have taken the feelings of others and care very little if they are destroyed. We might not tell lies to

Magi like Herod in order to find the where-a-bouts of Jesus, but lies in order to protect ourselves, what others might think of us, what others might do to us, have been on our lips. The selfishness of Herod would destroy the lives of many children in Bethlehem. The selfishness of God's people, you and me today, destroy our relationship with our Lord, with our neighbors, and with our families. What comes from shameless self promotion above all things is a lack of love for our God and for our neighbor. You are the Herod of our time. That may sound harsh and it's meant to. The Law convicts you as much as it does me. I, too, am Herod. Murderous words and thoughts, lies told to put you and me above others, only tear down the very people that God loves as His very own.

The wise men's treasure is for the treasured King. Our treasure is for the treasured King. In this brand new year I hope that lesson handed down by these Magi will carry on for us throughout the whole year. Just as the treasure the Magi possessed belonged to the King – so does ours. All that we have has been provided by God. It belongs to Him. All that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. The Bible says, "*We are not our own, we were bought at a price*" (1 Cor. 6). The price the Lord paid for you was the death of Jesus. Blood is what bought you – much better than gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Beloved, treat yourself as one who does not belong to yourself. Treat yourself as one that belongs to God – you were bought at a price. This is a good thing.

Treat your neighbor as one who does not belong to you but rather belongs to the Lord. They, too, were bought at a price. That's a good thing. When our desire is to bring our gifts, HIS gifts, to the King, we are putting what belongs first, into that first position. We belong to our Lord. That which we have, belongs to the Lord. And what He has given to us, that remains totally our very own, that belongs to us, that never runs out, is so much more valuable than being a king and having all the riches in the world.

We have forgiveness. Now, that is ours. We have Jesus' blood of righteousness. Now that is ours. God is unselfish with this precious gift to you, so that we may have it for our very own and even share what belongs to us with others, so that it might become theirs as well.

God loves you so much that this gift that He gives to you was protected. The Magi went home by another way to avoid evil Herod and also Jesus, Mary and Joseph were warned to flee to Egypt to avoid the wrath of a madman who would stop at nothing – even killing all the babies in Bethlehem – to protect his throne. Jesus would live... so that He could die. Jesus was found by a star... and then He would become the brightest star of all – showing how life eternal is attained. The Magi followed a star to find Jesus. Now, for us New Testament Christians, Jesus is that star of wonder, star of night, star of royal beauty bright.

This day of Epiphany is called the Christmas for the Gentiles because the Magi were the first Gentiles to come and worship the Newborn King. Much more would come to all people in what Jesus would accomplish. That's what we see in this Epiphany Season before us. The bright star of life shines forth for you in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.