

January 3, 2016
 Sermon for Epiphany (Observed)
 St Peter Lutheran Church
 Bowie, TX
 Larry Knobloch, Pastor
O Come, Emmanuel: Come, We Pray

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Epiphany

O King of the Nations, You Have Come

Matthew 2:2

Matthew 2:1–12 (ESV)

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ “ ‘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.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

By now you've all probably heard this joke enough times to be bored with it. But here goes. "What would have happened if it had been three wise women instead of three wise men? Answer: they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts."

With all due respect to all the very wise women among us, the real Wise Men *did* ask directions. And having traveled hundreds of miles, they were as on time as they could have been.

Moreover, by the time they arrived in Bethlehem, the Holy Family had long since moved out of the stable and were living in a house. And what of the gifts they brought? Turns out they were not only practical, but they were also valuable and prophetic. Joseph and Mary could have used the gold to provide for their needs on their journey to Egypt. And frankincense and myrrh remind us of Christ's priestly work in praying for us, then dying for our sins and being buried. Somehow, I don't think any casserole would convey that message.

Only Matthew has the story of the Wise Men, and his audience is primarily Jewish. You'd think since the Wise Men were probably Gentiles, Matthew would have let Luke tell their story. Luke is the writer who seems most concerned with reaching out to tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, Greeks, and the like. But the Bible is full of surprises, and it's Matthew who tells the story of the Wise Men.

Matthew, perhaps the earliest Gospel writer, could have told us about Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, Jesus' birth in the stable, and being welcomed by choirs of angels and shepherds, but he doesn't. He skips all that and tells us about the Wise Men who come perhaps up to two years later. Clearly, their story must be important to Matthew, or he wouldn't tell it.

And it is. So Matthew includes it. It's important because *The Story of the Wise Men Shows Us That Jesus Is the King and Savior of All People*.

One kind of people for whom Jesus is King and Savior is Jews. When the Wise Men arrive in Jerusalem after their long journey, they start asking people they meet on the street, "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*" (v 2).

They're in the capital city of David, the center of Jewish history, religion, culture, and scholarship. So surely, they think, the average man on the street will know more than they do of the new King's birth and whereabouts. They assume everyone they meet, including King Herod, will be delighted to learn that a new King, a descendant of David, has been born, in fulfillment of the prophecies they've studied.

Boy, are they in for a surprise! Very few people think this is good news. Herod doesn't think it's good news. He's poured his heart, soul, and fortune into being the king of Judea. He's been confirmed by the Roman Senate. He's spent millions on public works projects, including a new temple to endear himself to the people. He's slaughtered so many members of his own family whom he thought threatened his throne that it's hard to keep count. Herod, not really a Jew, but 100 percent politician, is *not* happy to learn that a new King is born.

The priests, the Sadducees, the Pharisees—really the whole Jewish ruling class—aren't happy about the news either. Over the last century or so they've worked out a carefully balanced relationship with the Roman occupiers.

The priests and Sadducees get to run the temple and collect tithes and offerings in return for keeping the people subject to Rome. The Pharisees get a free hand policing morality and religious life of the people in exchange for not interfering with the priests and Sadducees.

And I suspect most citizens of Jerusalem aren't too happy about a new King being born either. If the Romans see the newborn King growing up and gathering a following that might threaten their power, there could be a violent intervention. That would be bad for the peace and bad for business.

So practically nobody but a few Jewish shepherds and some Gentile Wise Men rejoice in the news that Jesus is born, "the king of the Jews."

But it's not a surprise. Isaiah not only prophesied the birth of King Jesus, the descendant of Jesse and David, seven hundred years before it happened, but he also predicted his rejection. In ch 53, Isaiah writes, "He was despised and rejected by men . . . despised, and *we esteemed him not*" (v 3).

John, who doesn't give a nativity story, nonetheless tells us, "He came to his own, and *his own people did not receive him*" (Jn 1:11).

And for the most part even today, Jewish people *still* do not receive Jesus. Their Messiah was prophesied. He was longed for. He came. He was rejected. And He still is. But that doesn't mean He's not King of the Jews.

Gentile Wise Men recognized that He is, even if most Jews do not. Rejection, even by His own people, does not make Him any less the true King of Israel.

Some Christians in recent years have pulled back from proclaiming Jesus the King of the Jews. Most Jews resent being the target of evangelism. So as an expression of goodwill and understanding, some church groups have decided they'll no longer reach out to Jews with the Gospel.

But what gives Christians the right to withhold good news from those for whom it was originally intended? Certainly the New Testament doesn't.

God sent His Son to be their King and Savior. Jews still need to hear about Him. So we keep praying that God will open closed eyes and grant the gift of faith that all Israel might be saved (Rom 11:26).

Another kind of people for whom Jesus is King and Savior is Gentiles. That's who the Wise Men are. They're the first non-Jewish people we know of to believe in Jesus. Their inclusion in the people of God would have been stunning and revolutionary for Matthew's Jewish Christian readers. Despite the Old Testament promises of a descendant of David who would rule the nations, Jews didn't think of the citizens of the nations as being citizens of the kingdom of God. Gentiles might be subjects, tributaries, or vanquished foes in submission to the kingdom of God ruled by David's son, but not equal members. Surely, Gentiles could never be children of God, heirs of the covenant promises.

Oh, yes, they could! That's the whole point of this story being included in Matthew's Gospel.

Gentile Wise Men perhaps from Persia, “near kings,” as Origen, one of the Church Fathers, calls them, come to Jesus bringing gifts, and they are welcomed. They are not just subjects visiting a foreign conqueror; they are valued and cherished citizens, equal in standing before God with any natural born child of Abraham.

How do we know they’re God’s children too? Because God called them to His Son. God put the star in the sky where Gentiles as surely as Jews could see it. God wants *everyone in every nation*, all the Gentiles, to come in faith to His Son.

That’s what the Great Commission of Holy Baptism is all about. The risen Lord Jesus, before He ascends into heaven, assembles His disciples in Galilee and tells them, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Mt 28:19). Just as He called through the star, in Baptism, God calls each one of us His.

Then through their actions the Wise Men evidenced their faith. They had believed the promises of the Bible about the star of the new King. They acted on their faith and sought Him out. They offered Him the best they had, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They knelt in worship and then rose from their knees as holy saints. Gentiles and holy saints.

Anyone who believes in Jesus and acts in faith as they did, Jew or Gentile, is included in the family of Abraham and is a citizen of the kingdom of God and his Son, Jesus.

The final kind of people for whom Jesus is King and Savior is sinners.

From a lifetime of hearing Christmas stories of the Wise Men, singing songs such as “We Three Kings,” placing the Wise Men in manger scenes, and having our children dress up as Wise Men for church programs, we have a warm place in our heart for them.

So did the Early Church. One of the first known works of Christian art is painted on a second-century tomb in the catacombs. It depicts the Wise Men bringing gifts to Jesus. By the Middle Ages, the Wise Men were considered saints. Their supposed relics, originally from Constantinople, are venerated in the cathedral at Cologne, Germany. They’ve even had names tradition has given them: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

The Wise Men, the Magi, by our standards, and by God’s standards, were a bit off on their theology. They were astrologers who mixed the religion they got from Jewish exiles in Persia and the superstition they got from their native Persian culture along with seeking wisdom from the stars.

Nevertheless, God somehow worked with what was familiar and important to them and revealed to them a profound truth.

The King of the Jews, promised and predicted in Num 24:17, had come. The Wise Men had read the Hebrew Scriptures. The Word of God said, “*A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.*” They saw a most unusual star shining far off, immediately assumed it pointed to the new King’s birth, followed it, and found Jesus. They were probably still in need of some serious teaching, but their faith was alive and well.

Not as Jews but as Gentile sinners they came to worship the newborn King of the Jews.

And they were welcomed. They were let into the house, where they saw Jesus with their own eyes. Then God confirmed their inclusion in the kingdom of God by granting them a vision that warned them not to return to Herod, who wanted to kill Jesus, but to return home another way.

The message of the Wise Men is that God welcomes sinners to the kingdom of his Son. Make no mistake: false doctrine, false practice of religion, mixing truth from God's Word with errors—even by well-meaning folks such as the Wise Men—is sin.

But Jesus is everyone's King, not just the King of the Jews or the King of the righteous, but the King of sinners who receive Him.

It's just as we'll sing during Communion in "O Little Town of Bethlehem":

How silently, how silently
 The wondrous gift is giv'n!
 So God imparts to human hearts
 The blessings of his heav'n.
 No ear may hear his coming;
 But in this world of sin,
 Where meek souls will receive him, still
 The dear Christ enters in. (*LSB* 361:3)

Did you catch that last line?

Whatever the sin of the Wise Men or yours or mine, the hymn's promise is true: "Where meek souls will receive him, still, The dear Christ enters in."

All who believe in Jesus and are baptized are included in the kingdom of Jesus, regardless of background, Jew, Gentile, sinner—that last one is all of us.

That's the message of the Wise Men, a message of great joy. That's why we sing again and again during this holy season, and throughout the year.

Lord Jesus, longed-for King of the Nations, you have come. Receive us by your grace and welcome us through faith into your kingdom, just as you did the Wise Men. In your name we pray.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus!

Amen.