



A CHRISTMAS FOR ALL NATIONS
Epiphany Sunday (8 January Anno Domini 2012)
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Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, amen!

Epiphany - the Gentiles' Christmas. Jesus is revealed not only to be Israel's Messiah and King but the world's Messiah and King. Isaiah 60:3 says: ***"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."***

The feast of Christmas is over, and yet it has only just begun. God has let the word out because He doesn't want to keep it a secret. He sends a star to the Babylonian astrologers to tell the good news that the world's King has been born in Bethlehem. Angels announced the news to the shepherd's in Bethlehem's fields, but God shapes His message in a different way for the Gentiles, a star will guide them. It is fully visible from the Eastern Lands. And here, a marvelous reversal takes place. Israel who once went into exile in the east now has astrologers come from the east to seek the Jewish King in the west.

"A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6) As the Queen of Sheba once visited Israel's King Solomon, bringing him gifts, so the magi come with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to pay homage to the little Christ Child who is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Herod, of course, would have none of this. He was an Idumean, and Edomite, a son of Esau. Hardly a proper "king of the Jews" as he proclaimed himself to be. He was a murderous imposter. He tried to buy the people's affection with political projects, as insecure politicians are prone to do. He renovated the temple, but everyone knew the dirty little secret that Herod was hardly a king much less a Jew. ***"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews,"*** the magi asked of Herod. They thought Herod had had a son and wanted to welcome the little king into the world. But Herod's sons were an endangered species under Herod's rule, and Herod was deeply troubled at magi question. So was all of Jerusalem. Something fishy was going on here. A king of the Jews had been born and these pagan astrologers seemed to have the news before it even makes the headlines in Jerusalem! Leave it to God to work this mysterious way!

Herod has no clue about the true king of the Jews, so he calls in the chief priests and the scribes. They point to Bethlehem, the little suburb of Jerusalem, by way the prophet Micah. ***"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."*** Bethlehem was the birthplace of David, the shepherd-king. It was the burial place of Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. It was the place where lambs were raised for sacrifice in the temple. Bethlehem's name means "house of bread." And so it is in Bethlehem, Judah's house of bread that the Bread of Life is born, King David's promised descendant, the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was born. Bethlehem finds its ultimate purpose in Jesus.

The Word and the star are the guides. God reaches out. He wants the whole world to know about Jesus. He wants the whole world to come and worship Him. He gives them signs to follow - a star in the eastern sky. He gives them the prophetic Word. Through Word and star, they come to Jesus - a little Child, perhaps one, no more than two years old. A toddler hiding behind the skirts of His mother.

There's an oddity in the text. Perhaps you noticed it. The Child comes first. ***"And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped Him."*** The Child comes first, then His mother. This isn't the usual order in a culture where children were considered nothing. But this is no ordinary Child. He is the promised Child, God's Child, the world's Child, and the world, represented by the magi, have come to see for themselves what God has given to the world.

They fall down on their faces, and they worship Him. They worship a little kid! Shepherds knelt before His manger; magi bow in reverence before Him. He didn't look much like a king. His mother certainly didn't look royalty. There was no halo shining around His head. He looked no different than any other toddler in Bethlehem. Yet through the Word and through the star, God had opened the eyes of the magi, making them wise beyond human wisdom, revealing the marvelous mystery that this Child was a King unlike any other and not just a King but the Lord God to worship.

They open their treasure boxes, gifts of gold and incense and myrrh. Costly gifts fit for a king. Perhaps tools of their trade. In some ways, even prophetic, though I doubt they intended it that way. Gold for Jesus' kingship; incense for His divinity; myrrh for His suffering and death. It's odd when you think about it. At Christmas, we give gifts to each other. At the first "Christmas of the Gentiles," they brought gifts to Jesus.

And then they went home again, these astrologers from the east. They departed to their own country by another way. A way around King Herod, the way of King Jesus. And that's how it is when you encounter this Christ Child, or He encounters you. You go back to your life, your vocation, your community by a different way, the way of faith in the promises of God that extend from Bethlehem to the farthest corners of the earth.

What do we do with Epiphany today? What does this story of Herod and the magi have to do with us? There are a number of points, of which I will touch only a few.

We all are, by our fallen nature, in our core, little King Herods. You may not like to think of yourself that way, but you need to recognize it and own up to it. We don't want competing kings. We want to be the king - in charge, in control, calling all the shots. We want no one over us; we will bend to no one's rule. The news of this Child is not welcome news to the old Adam in us. Herod may say he wants to worship Jesus, but he actually has other plans. He wants to get rid of Him; He wants to kill Him.

Oh, I know, you wouldn't want to kill baby Jesus. But you might want Him out of the way when He interferes with you being the lord of your life. And therein is the Herod in each of us. Think of how annoyed and indignant we become at being told what to do. Think of all the ways we make excuses and justify what we do when someone threatens our reign.

The wise men touch our lives, also. We don't follow stars as they did, but we were all led by someone to the Christ Child. The prophet Daniel said, "***Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever***" (Daniel 12:3). When we hear the word "star" we tend to think "celebrity." But the stars of the kingdom are not celebrities but those who lead many to righteousness, those who point the way to the Word and the Sacraments, those who reach out to the seeker and draw them to the font, to the altar, to the Word. Those are the stars of the kingdom, and they shine as brightly in the eye of God as any star in the sky.

As the wise men knelt before the lowly Christ Child and worshipped Him, even though His glory and divinity were utterly concealed by His two year oldness, so we bow down and worship the same Jesus concealed and revealed for us in the Word preached, in the Bread and the Wine, trusting as the wise men did, that God is true to His Word.

We offer our gifts to Jesus. Not gold, incense, and myrrh, but money that represents the fruits of our labors. We offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We offer our very best to Jesus, not to win His favor or to bribe Him or to cut some sort of deal with Him, but because we have been brought to a faith in this humble Son of Mary and the knowledge that He is the Son of God - our King, our Lord, our Christ, our Savior and Redeemer.

We return home by a different way - no longer the way of this world; but by the way of faith and righteousness. The Word of Jesus is a living and active Word. It does things. It kills and makes us alive. It justifies and sanctifies us. Hearing and believing, we are new people. "Wise" men and women, that is, wise in the way of faith. This holy Christ Child will give you a new path to walk, a new way of seeing yourself and those around you, a new way of thinking. It's the way of being forgiven, of being embraced by God. And along that way is the fruit that the Spirit works in you, fruits for God and for those whom God puts in your path - His gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control.

The way of King Jesus doesn't take us out of the world but puts us right back into the world to shine as stars in this present darkness, reflecting Him who is God of God and Light of Light, the Savior the world, the babe of Bethlehem and the King of all creation.

May His salvation light shine brightly in you for all to see. For in Christ alone all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit in Jesus name, amen and amen.

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