

Rev. Danny Mackey
The Epiphany of Our Lord (observed)
January 7, 2018
Matthew 2:1-12
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

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

“For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.”

There was only one problem: the Wise Men showed up at the wrong place. They assumed that the king of the Jews was in Jerusalem, in Herod’s palace. And then they made the announcement to Herod the Great—and all he heard was that a rival to his throne had been born. “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” It went even worse for Bethlehem and that town’s weeping mothers—weeping for the baby boys ripped from their arms and then ripped apart by Herod’s soldiers. These Wise Men used the wisdom of men and the result was the death of Bethlehem’s sons.

You see, the star didn’t actually get the job done. It was like a huge billboard announcing to those ancient stargazers *that* a king had been born to the Jews. But it didn’t tell them *where* to find Him. Using human reason, or what the Scriptures call worldly wisdom, the Wise Men trotted off to the logical spot, Jerusalem, only to find business as usual and no one celebrating the birth of a king. Instead, they shook Herod, who in turn shook Jerusalem and its neighbor, the little town of Bethlehem.

Nature, and even a miracle such as this star, only gets you so far. You can observe the world and measure it and analyze it. You can learn so much about it that you’ll feel pretty confident that you can predict what will happen and when it’ll happen and how much of something will happen. The Old Farmer’s Almanac and meteorologists do it all the time—with limited success. You can even observe, hypothesize, and test human beings and how they’ll act and react. You can go a long way with this human wisdom. We have, and we’ll go farther, I’m sure. It can get you to Jerusalem, but there are limits to where it can take you. The Scriptures, however, can get you all the way to where the Child may be found.

King Herod, although he was extremely wicked, was no fool. He knew where to look, and so he summoned the scribes and asked about the ancient prophecy. They answered from Micah: “In Bethlehem of Judea.” The answer was provided 750 years earlier, but they didn’t know the question, which would put Bethlehem of Judea in jeopardy. That town, too little

to be among the clans of Judah, wasn't least among its rulers because from it would come a ruler from of old, from ancient of days—that's language indicating eternity where God alone exists and has His being—and this ruler will shepherd His people Israel—which is what God alone does. Israel was a shepherd himself, as was his descendant David. The Shepherd of shepherds is God Himself. Ezekiel 34:15 puts it this way: "I Myself will be the shepherd of My sheep..., declares the Lord GOD." Micah, from which the scribes find Herod's answer, equates the word "ruler" with "shepherd" (Mi 5:2; cf. 3:2, 3). And so we can also say that this Child is the Ruler of rulers or, as the Scriptures call Him elsewhere, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Now, I don't want you to have the impression that the Wise Men were without faith. Reason and faith aren't mutually exclusive, as some would have you think. The Wise Men used human reason, but it wasn't reason that motivated them to make the long journey from the East. These Wise Men probably journeyed all the way from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia—a journey that would have taken months. I suspect that they were from the order of Wise Men that Prophet Daniel ruled and trained over 500 years before the first Christmas. Evangelist Matthew calls them *magi*, which we might translate as magicians or astrologers or alchemists, but were more like what we think of as scientists. Though they studied and used science, these Wise Men didn't worship Science. They knew there were limits to what human reason can discover—and them showing up at the wrong place simply reinforced that truth. This where their faith came into play.

For over five centuries this scientific order preserved and discussed (and probably debated) the prophecy that a king of the Jews would be born—and that this king would be their king as well. The star, you see, was prophesied by a possible "ancestor" of these Wise Men named Balaam, son of Beor, who was from their region. 1,400 years before Christ, Balaam prophesied, "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Nu 24:17b). The Wise Men, upon beholding the star, remembered the oracle spoken by Balaam, recorded by Moses, and taught by Daniel. They trusted in that word, which revealed the knowledge of the Most High and Almighty God. So, with the prophecy tucked into their hearts, the Wise Men journeyed toward Jerusalem. And with the additional Word from Micah, the scribes emboldened the Wise Men's hearts. They then traveled the five miles south to Bethlehem, the city of David.

What happened next? Suddenly, the star they had seen when it rose reappeared, and this time it led the way to the house where the child and His mother were found. The star was an answering sign to their faith. The star, like all miracles, didn't create the Wise Men's faith. That was created by God's Word, which they received from the prophets. The Word gave them understanding of the miraculous star and motivated them to seek out the promised King of kings. In faith, they brought tribute to their once and future king.

We often think of there being three Wise Men because they bring with them three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Eastern Christians often depict there being 12 of them. (The idea is that the 12 Jewish tribes and the 12 Gentile tribes are all brought together to worship the one true King.) Also, much of tradition calls them kings, in reference to Psalm 72:10, "May the kings of Tarshish... render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!" We don't know if there were three or more than three Wise Men. We don't know, for sure, if they were kings. But we do know of their faith and its confession thereof in their three gifts.

The 3rd-century theologian Origen of Alexandria and many others saw in these three gifts a mysterious confession. They don't confess about the Wise Men but rather confess who this Child is that Mary held in her lap. What Child is this? Gold confesses the Child to be a king, because kings are adorned with this most precious of metals. Frankincense confesses Him to be God Himself in our flesh, because frankincense was burned in prayer as a fragrant offering. And myrrh? That's the oddest gift, because it confesses the Child's death. Myrrh was used to anoint and perfume dead bodies. This Child came to be a sacrifice, to offer His life on behalf of the world—including these Wise Men, and including me and you. The result of God's divine and perfect wisdom is the death of Bethlehem's greatest Son.

The Church, along with these Wise Men from the East, rejoices exceedingly with great joy on Epiphany because God threw open the door of His grace to Gentiles, to non-Jews, which the Wise Men most certainly represent. The Christ Child is not just the king of Jews, as Herod greatly feared, but rather is the King of kings—the king of all people, both ancient and present and to come! He is God come in the flesh to battle sin, death and the devil—the enemies of the entire human race. The sacrifice He offered is in exchange for every human creature—both those who are near and those who are far off. When the Wise Men kneel

before Him in worship, they are but the very first countless non-Jews who have fallen before Him century after century. Indeed, this very morning, in a matter of minutes, we will come and kneel before the Promised King who came as that little Child. As Saint Jerome preached one Christmas Eve, some 1,700 years ago, the same Christ who manged in Bethlehem is manged in our hands when we receive Him in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Did the Wise Men have the experience so many have had in all those years since? That while they offered Him gifts, the feeling that the gift exchange was all backward? The Child had come to offer them and us the true and lasting gifts: His embrace, His welcome, His forgiveness and love and life. From the Child's face shines the light of divine love. The Child is the light that shines more brightly than the miraculous star. He is Mary's Son, and He is also God of God, Light of light, very God of very God. And He is the true Light, which enlightens everyone, who has come into the world!

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus + to life everlasting.