

January 6, 2024  
Epiphany  
Is. 60:1-6, Eph. 3:1-12, Matt. 2:1-12  
“Wise Unto Salvation”

Yesterday, January 6th, was a special day. It was "Epiphany." Epiphany has been celebrated in the Christian church since about 200 A.D. and this is how it came about.

Centuries ago there was a huge split between Christians in the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. There were a lot of reasons for the split, political and geographical. But the main reason was doctrinal.

The Christians in the east never accepted the fact that a bishop, or pastor, in Rome could stand up and say that he was the Papa, or Pope, and had authority over all other Christians.

The remnant of the Eastern Church is today called the Eastern or Greek or Russian Orthodox Church, and the church in the west came to be called the Roman Catholic Church.

The western church from which the Lutheran Church comes from, celebrates Christmas on December 25th. The Eastern Orthodox church insisted that Jesus was born on January 6th, so if you have any Greek friends you may have noticed that they don't celebrate Christmas until January 6th.

The western church decided to extend their celebration of the birth of Christ through January 6th, but they called that day Epiphany, which means reveal and they chose the story of the Wise Men as the gospel for Epiphany. The story of the Wise Men teaches us two very important lessons. First, Jesus Christ came to save all people and second, believers give their best to Christ.

The Magi were mysterious people. Only Matthew tells us about them, and even Matthew doesn't give us a lot of information. He says, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

The popular Christmas Carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are" about the Wise Men probably have three errors in it. First of all, we don't know if there were three. Matthew never tells us how many wise men there were.

Secondly, they weren't kings. He calls them Magi. Our English word magic comes from the Greek word, Magi. They were astrologers or astronomers. And third, they weren't from the Orient. We associate the Orient with the Far East, the Asian countries. Matthew is talking about the Near East. The Wise Men probably came from Babylon.

There seems to be no shortage of stories about these men from outside of scripture, including their names, their ages and even their skin colors but all we know for sure is that they followed a miraculous star that they knew would lead them to their Savior. It led them not only to the general place, but to the very house where Jesus was.

After they saw Jesus and worshipped him, they left to go back to their own country, and we never hear of them again. Yet their short story leaves a lasting impression.

The one great truth of the story is that no one is excluded from the great love of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, all of them. It doesn't make any difference what country you were born in or what color of skin you have or what language you speak, the heart of everyone is the same – dead set against God and destined for hell.

Jesus came to bring forgiveness for all. God promised from the beginning of time that a Savior would come who would crush the devil's head, and that promise was for all mankind.

God chose one nation to be the people from whom the Savior would come, but already then he had said that through Abraham, all people would be blessed. We hear about that throughout the Christmas story, how the angel told the shepherds he had good news for all people, how Jewish Simeon said the baby Jesus would also be a light for the Gentiles. Everyone is included.

And how true it is, that God wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Because if we don't sense that urgency, then we miss the whole point of the story of the Wise Men.

But there's another insight into the love of God that the story of the Wise Men gives us. All of the people connected to the birth of Jesus were not only Jewish people, they were also not poor people either.

Mary was a poor young woman. Joseph was a humble carpenter. The shepherds worked in the fields with animals but the wise men were none of those things. Not only were they foreigners, but they were also wealthy. They came from the upper crust. They were not common folk.

Sometimes we can so easily dismiss the wealthy from the kingdom of God: But God loves the upper crust, too and the Bible has many examples of God's love for the rich and powerful.

Like the rich young ruler who once came to Jesus, and it says that Jesus loved him and shared the word with him. Zacchaeus was a prosperous businessman who met Jesus and his life was never the same after that. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were members of the Sanhedrin, the center of Jewish power and intellectualism and they became followers of Jesus.

The point is: God loves all people. With him there is no favoritism. Nobody is too rich or too poor, too smart or too dumb. Christ died for all. God so loved the world.

And even though we may live in nice neighborhoods surrounded by the luxuries of an affluent society like that from which the Wise Men might have come from, remember that the status in life doesn't change the condition of the hearts.

Everybody needs the blood of Jesus to cleanse them as much as the homeless and poor in the inner city. Without Jesus to cleanse them, they are lost and their journey is one of despair.

The story of the wise men makes us realize that we are all missionaries. We are to be channels of God's love to everyone. As a church, we need to make it our mission to tell everyone because God wants all to be saved.

The second lesson that we learn from the Wise Men is that believers give their best to Christ. Those who believe in Jesus will give him their best and be willing to make sacrifices.

Just think about the Wise Men and all they had to do to find Jesus. This was not a quick weekend getaway. This was a trip that took weeks, even months. They left behind their families and their business and intellectual pursuits to follow the star. They made sacrifices to make this journey.

Plus the wise men gave Jesus their very best gifts. They brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and these gifts have a lot of symbolism associated with them.

Gold represents wealth, royalty. It is a gift fit for a king. (Jesus was the King of Kings) Frankincense reminds us of the incense that was used in the temple. Its smoke rising up to heaven symbolized the prayers of God's people rising up to heaven. And myrrh was a fragrant perfume that was used to anoint the dead – to embalm and preserve them. (Jesus was The Sacrificial Lamb)

Like the wise men we also want to be willing to make sacrifices for Jesus and give him our very best. The greatest gift – the greatest sacrifice – you can give to God is yourself.

You say but I have given nothing to Him today and I say yes you have, even today, you have given Him something of yourself. You have given Him your time by being here. You prepared for a journey this morning, by getting up, and getting dressed, ready to seek a King.

You look for ways to volunteer and serve in this church. You live your life in a way that honors Christ. In this way, your worship of God is your sacrifice to Him. But here is a fact I want you all to remember today: What God wants most of all – above everything else is, You. He wants your heart .

As you begin this new year, re-dedicate yourselves to God and to His service and to this congregation and its ministry. Give God your very best and walk the way of the Wise Men. Walk with the intent to give him your very best.

And now look again at verse twelve with me: "Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way." Isn't it interesting that after they worshiped Jesus that they could not go back the same way that they had come?

I find that to be a fact even today. Once you know Jesus Christ you are never the same again. The Bible says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation." New attitudes, new values, new found happiness and peace. Jesus Christ changes you.

Jacob wrestled with God and never walked the same the rest of his life. Isaiah stepped into the presence of God and proclaimed "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts." He was never the same again.

That is what happened to the wise men when they encountered Christ – they were changed. We call that faith. Faith in the promises that were given to them and as a result, they believed that Christ was the Messiah and their Savior.

The wise men saw a newborn babe on the lap of a poor woman, and yet they worshipped him and confessed that he was the Christ, the Son of God." The magi really were wise men and today, wise men still seek him, wise men still serve Him and wise men still worship him.

My prayer for us today is that we will be a church of wise men and women, seeking him, serving him and worshipping him as He leads us on a journey to a heavenly mansion. You are all highly intelligent people and today you know and understand what really matters. So be wise unto salvation, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.