

The Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord

6 January, Anno Domini 2024

Ephesians 3:1-12

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

Beloved Gentiles,

When the magi stepped into the home of the holy family, seeking the one whose star appeared to them in the East far from Jerusalem, a glorious reality suddenly came into full view. This toddler King of the Jews isn't just the king of the Jews. He is the Creator, the King, the Lord, and the Redeemer of Jews AND Gentiles - of all people. They came to worship and bring gifts of thanksgiving not just to A king, but to THEIR king. They believed Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Scriptures of the Jews. And because they believed those Scriptures, they believed the preaching of prophets like Isaiah who very clearly proclaimed that all nations would come to the Christ because He is the Christ of all nations. They believed that Jesus was their Savior.

Certainly, these men are the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. But they are more than that. They are the first non-Israelites to believe in Jesus! They are the first Gentiles to come in faith to receive the great gift which God had bestowed in fulfillment of His promises. They didn't have the Law. They didn't have circumcision. They clearly had some texts of the Old Testament. But they weren't Jews! And yet, they made the journey because they believed the Word which God had spoken by the prophets. And more than that, they desired for themselves the great blessing that had come to all men through this child. They desired salvation!

This is why God speaks. This is why men like Paul were made ministers - so that this good news of great joy that is for all people might be proclaimed to all the ends of the earth and that Jews and Gentiles together might be drawn to the Christ-child, not simply out of idle curiosity, but in true faith. God Almighty wants you and the rest of the world to know and believe that this Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, is your Lord who has descended from heaven to deliver you from the deep and terrifying darkness of sin, to shine the glorious light of God's mercy and compassion which scatters the shadow of death. This is why the prophetic office was given. This is why God spoke with Moses and even wrote down His Word with His own finger. This is why there was a temple and priests and sacrifices. This is why our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry on the very same day He rose from the dead - so that the glorious news of death's demise and your salvation would be proclaimed to the whole creation.

It is through that preaching, through hearing what God Himself has said, that you believe. The magi didn't come because of intuition or because of a strange warming in their hearts. They came because they heard the Word. They believed because they heard the Word. They believed the prophetic witness and received it as the living Word of the living God spoken for them. By the proclamation of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit created faith, true living faith, that stirred them to travel an unknown distance, perhaps in the face of great risk and danger, in order to receive this great gift from God.

We sometimes refer to the magi as wise men. And they certainly were but not because they were deep-thinking philosophers or because they had become masters of the wisdom of the ancients or because they had made detailed studies of nature and the heavens. In truth, the world would have found their actions quite foolish. They read some texts which came from some ancient nation that had long ago been conquered and subjugated. And on the basis of that they followed a star that they believed had been especially appointed for their sake to lead them to this "king". They undertook an uncertain and expensive journey.

And they went bearing some of the most lavish gifts you can imagine. That all sounds pretty foolish.

But it is only foolishness to those who are perishing. To those whose consciences have been hardened against their sin and against their need for salvation, the journey of the magi was a fantastic waste. To those who believe themselves to be of noble and honest conduct and are not troubled by the selfish, cruel, covetous thoughts that fill their own hearts as they fill the hearts of all men, there was nothing wise about the wise men. Even the Jews who counseled wicked Herod and enabled him to slaughter the Holy Innocents in his insane fear, knew where the Messiah was to be born and knew full well what was promised through the Messiah. Yet they didn't even believe the Word that they had heard. And so, we don't find them joining the magi caravan because they didn't believe the Scriptures and they didn't want a Savior.

But it wasn't foolishness to the magi because at the end of their journey they rightly believed that they would look upon their Savior, the one which the prophets of old spoke, the one whom God had promised would bear their sins and open to them and to all people the way to everlasting life. And when the star came to rest, there the magi found exactly what all repentant sinners long to see - the Lord Jesus Christ, whom kings and prophets of old had long foretold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of Gentiles and Jews.

Nothing has changed. Through the proclamation of God's Word through His servants and as the Scriptures are translated and disseminated across the globe, the Holy Spirit continues to create and sustain saving faith, drawing people to Jesus who has humbled Himself by being born of a virgin and being incarnate in our sinful flesh. This is the goal of true Christian preaching - to bring all sinners to Jesus who was born for them and who died for them, who was raised from the dead for them and who now sits at the right hand of God for them, to stir up in them a fervent desire to be with Christ and to hear His gracious Words of life and forgiveness.

St. Paul himself in Romans proclaimed “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ.” There is no faith outside of hearing Christ’s Word. No one can believe apart from hearing the Word of God. You cannot believe apart from hearing the Word of God. You cannot remain a Christian apart from hearing the Word of God. On the basis of what God Himself has said and done, faithful preaching holds before you the sin that has consumed you in death and then declares to you the mighty works of God in Christ Jesus to deliver us poor sinners from the judgment we deserve. Faith doesn’t ever come by your own wisdom or striving or earning. Faith can only be wrought in a person when he is first confronted with the unescapable reality of his own sin and the damnation he deserves and he says “Amen. That is me. I am lost unless God is merciful and will forgive me.” Then after being crushed under the weight of his guilt, the appointed servant of Christ speaks the words commanded by Christ “Your sins are forgiven.” All of this is purely a gift of God which, more than anything else, He desires you to have.

Ponder for even a moment the great miracle and thus the great mercy of God that you have been blessed to hear the Good News. None of us deserves a Savior. Not a single one of us has done anything to deserve the spilling of the Blood of God for our redemption. That, we understand to be the gift of God’s undeserved love and mercy. But do we consider that miracle that we have actually heard this good news? What have any of us done that we should know these things and knowing them believe them? It is so easy to take this part of our salvation for granted. Think of those saints in other countries who risk death to hear the Gospel or have a Bible in their possession. Yet here we sit, completely free, for now, to hear of our salvation, to hear all that God has done and continues to do for us, to hear again and again God’s the gracious promises which God speaks and those most precious of Words “Take, eat and drink; this is My Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” And yet, dear children of God, how quickly we despise and forsake this word. How quickly we cast aside what gives life for that which gives nothing, and

worse, that which brings death! The Word of God which is proclaimed and available to be read ought to be the most precious treasure of our hearts, a treasure of such great value that we will sacrifice everything, even life itself to have and hear it. Yet, how often we have tried to console ourself with every excuse under the sun as to why we have turned away our ears and hearts from the Word of our God. We hide behind our jobs, our family, our struggles, even our children. Shame on us. May our Lord have mercy upon us and forgive us for our hardness of heart.

Perhaps we forget that the Word of God isn't just what converts us initially and makes us Christians but that it also sustains and keeps faith. Neither you nor anyone else is strong enough to remain a Christian unless you continue to hear Christ's Word daily. This is what we confess when we confess the Christian Church. As Dr. Luther writes in the Small Catechism explaining the Third Article of the Creed "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." And this is what true living faith desires - to be with Jesus where He is and to receive the blessings which He gives. Notice that the faith of the magi didn't lead them to sit home and say "I believe. That's good enough." Absolutely not. True living faith is drawn to be with Jesus, to sit at Jesus' feet, and to hear His Word. It will not allow distance or time or cost to keep it away from the very One who gives us life, His life.

The Word, dear Christian, is your life. The preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world, for you, is the only light that can break through the darkness and despair that fill this world and your own life. And thanks be to God who appoints servants to proclaim to you the Good News of salvation, to hear your confession and absolve you of all your sins in the stead and by the command the Lord Jesus Christ, to preach to you the unsearchable riches of Christ who alone gives life and salvation to Jews and Gentiles, to all men.

It is this Gospel of which Paul was made a minister. It is this Gospel of which I was made a minister and was sent to you. Because this is what God in His mercy does. He calls and ordains and sends servants to preach the Gospel to you so that hearing you too may believe and be saved. The name, the face, the voice change over time. A different head has and eventually will pop up through the hole in this chasuble. It doesn't matter. What matters is the saving Word which is preached to you and for you. It isn't for my benefit that Christ has placed me into the pastoral office and then placed me into your midst. It's for your benefit, for your salvation, that in the Word I proclaim you hear the living voice of your Shepherd, Jesus Christ. It is His Word, not mine, which gives light to your path so that you may see clearly the way of death and the way of life which is in Christ. I too am saved by hearing the same Gospel from the lips of other servants of Christ and from your lips as you preach to me in song, in liturgy, and in conversation.

It is Christ's Word and Christ's Word alone which saves. And thus it is imperative that you remain in the Word every day; that you take it up in your homes; that you gather to its public proclamation in the Church, in which Christian Church our Lord daily and richly forgives all your sins and the sins of all believers. Without this Word you are hopelessly lost forever. Without this Word you will be led astray through the false teachers which plague this earth with their lies and deceit, who lead you everywhere but the Lord Jesus for your salvation. But by this Word, through this Word, which once took on your sinful flesh, you will be saved. By this Word your sins will be cast into the eternal darkness and the radiant light of Christ will shine upon you to give you life, light, peace, and joy.

Let us then give thanks to God for His Word which saves us. Let us give thanks to God for blessing us with ministers who faithfully proclaim His Word for our salvation. Let us follow the footsteps of the wise men with the same eagerness and joy to Jesus, seeking the mercy that He brings and in thankfulness bearing

with us offerings of prayer and praise, tithe and talent. And may God richly bless that Word that He has caused you to hear this day that it may bear much fruit in you - fruit of faith, fruit of comfort, fruit of even greater eagerness to hear and study His Word, and fruit of love.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.