

The Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord
6 January, Anno Domini 2025
St. Matthew 2:1-12

Beloved Gentiles grafted into the life-giving vine of our Lord Jesus Christ,

I want you take special note of the three different responses before us this evening to the good news of the birth of the King of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah. First you have the magi who have undertaken a long, expensive journey for purpose of worshipping not their own king, but the king of a rather insignificant group of people already ruled over by the Roman emperor. But they were overjoyed to make this trip because they believed what they had heard of the Messiah, perhaps as long ago as the Israelite exiles in Babylon like Daniel, and the leading of the star which God had appointed to guide them. Second, you have puppet-King Herod who only sees a rival in this purported King of the Jews and ends up committing mass murder in an attempt to thwart this challenger. Third, the Jews themselves who knew exactly where the Christ was to be born because they had and knew the Scriptures as evidenced by the fact that they quoted them to Herod. But rather than being filled with the utmost joy and even offering to lead the magi, they were troubled along with Herod because they feared Herod and they feared the loss of their position in society.

Here we find a warning for ourselves that we must take with the utmost seriousness. We were once like the magi, Gentiles who didn't have the Word and promises of God. We have been called out of the darkness of death into the light of Christ and the life that He brings. We have been mercifully granted the great gift of knowing the whole truth of God's Word. In Holy Scripture we have the brilliant sun of God's own full and inerrant testimony to who He is, who we are, and all that He has in mercy done and continues to do for us. God has also graciously provided the moon and stars of the Church's ancient creeds and the confessions prepared by our Lutheran forefathers. By these faithful expositions of God's Word we are armed against every manner of false teaching that would lead us away from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the salvation that He alone gives us through the preaching of His Word and the gifts of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. We have become, in some sense, as the Jews were at the time

of Jesus' birth. We know (or we ought to know) the Holy Scriptures. We ought to be able to quote them when asked to give a reason for the hope that is in us. We are no longer in the darkness. We live a light even brighter than that which shined on the patriarchs and prophets because we have the full revelation of God's mercy and salvation in Christ Jesus.

But do we receive these things in faith? Do we hear as those longing for salvation and freedom from our sins and death? Is there joy in our hearts when God our Father speaks and gives forgiveness and life? Or, like Herod, like the Jews at the time, do we hear of the presence of the Christ and our concern is "what might that cost me in this world"? Will people mock me and reject me? Will I have to stop seeking after the treasures of the world? The danger now is the same as then, to love our life in this world - our position, our goods, our friends - more than the Christ such that we do not go to meet him either with our hearts or our bodies. The presence of Christ is upsetting to all things worldly because that which is worldly, that which is of the sinful flesh, is contrary to Christ. Christ came to overthrow the devil and his kingdom. Christ came to make peace with you, not with sin or the devil.

Woe to us if our hearts are cold to the things of salvation. Cry out to God, ask other Christians to pray for you, if you feel no hunger or thirst for the Gospel. Woe to us if, like Herod, the Word of God falls on arrogant and deaf ears and hearts that are filled with self and covet power or even just ease. Woe to us if, like the unbelieving Jews, our hearts are too busy making sure that the devil's world likes us and doesn't think us weird or uncool. Woe to us if, having heard the truth, we allow ourselves to sacrifice even an ounce of the truth of God's gracious revelation for what is easier or more palatable or more popular with our friends. Woe to us, if we consider any of our sins anything less than absolutely repugnant to God so that we despise His grace and any of the means of salvation. These temptations are very real and present threats to everyone, including us. We are no stronger or smarter or more pious than Herod or the Jews. We will turn to the same unbelief and hardness of hearts without the continual reproof and forgiveness and strength and comfort and protection of the Word of God and the Means of Grace. We all know brothers and sisters in Christ to whom this has happened. Pray fervently that our Lord would bring back the erring and the delinquent and likewise keep us from falling away.

Meanwhile, a bunch of scruffy nobody shepherds and now some pagan sages from the east won't let anything get in the way of meeting the Messiah. After all, Holy Scripture is clear - this is the Savior of the whole world, not just the circumcised sons of Abraham. All nations of the world are blessed in this child of Bethlehem sent from His heavenly home. This is the great joy of Epiphany - the Son of God has come for Jew and Gentile alike. There isn't a single person that has, is, or will walk this earth for whom Jesus Christ didn't shed His holy and precious Blood in payment for their sins. That means Jesus was born, died, and rose again for you. It means that Jesus paid for your sins. It doesn't matter where you were born, how old you are, what language you speak, what your test scores are or any thing else. Jesus is your Savior. God sent Him to save you just as much as He sent Him to save Adam, Abraham, David, Peter, or Paul.

That is why God has caused you to hear about Jesus - through parents, a friend, a spouse, a neighbor, or maybe even a complete stranger. He wants you to believe. He wants you to be caught up in that number beyond counting of those who believe that Jesus, God's only Son, born in the flesh, has redeemed you from sin and death. He doesn't want you to perish in unbelief apart from His forgiveness. He doesn't want you suffer the eternal judgment of Herod and the unbelieving Jews who refused to listen to the Scriptures and chased after the false gods of power and position and self-righteousness. He doesn't want you to die in despair and hopelessness under the great weight of your sin. He sent His prophets in the days of old. He sent a star to draw in the wise men. He has placed before you the Holy Scriptures to lead you to Jesus. He causes pastors to preach the Good News of the forgiveness of your sins so that hearing this Gospel you too might believe and know the love of God in Christ.

How absolutely wondrous! Think of the sheer magnitude of the fact that the Lord of heaven and earth has entered into our humanity, into our very flesh, in order to offer Himself over to death as the sacrifice for our sins! Now ponder how God has ensured that to this day that Good News, that Gospel, has been continuously proclaimed literally, for over two millennia so that today, again, right now YOU may hear that YOUR sin and YOUR death have been swallowed up by Christ's death and cast away from you as far as east is from

west! God's wants YOU to know and has made sure that you have and continue to. And what a joy to be able to pour out in thanksgiving all that we have been given, to lay our treasures at the feet of Christ with wise men, so that that salvation can continue to be proclaimed to us in all its glorious truth and purity to us, to our children, and to our children's children! What is our time, our money, or our energy compared to eternal life? What a joy that God provides us the opportunity to support the proclamation and distribution of salvation and eternal life! How absolutely incredible that God tasks us poor sinners with teaching our children who their Creator and Savior is, teaching them how to pray, teaching them eternal truth, that through us, through our humble confession of Him, God would bring salvation to our friends and neighbors who do not yet know Him? Father, grant us strength that we may joyfully go about these most holy tasks with joy and a fervent desire to see those who are lost saved and those who have wandered from the truth returned to the fold. The world, even our own reason, may believe us to be fools. But your faith, your hope, and your sacrifices given in faith will be vindicated on the Last Day when Christ, the true and only Morning Star will appear and all the shadows and darkness of sin will be scattered completely and forever and the truth of His Word will be known immediately by all.

Jesus has died and forgiven the sins of all people. The Blood of Jesus knows no boundaries. It is no respecter of persons or ages or languages or lineages. It doesn't know socio-economic class, education level, or gender. It is for sinners of every nationality, every tongue, every time. It is for you. It is for your children. It is for your neighbor. It is for all who are near and all who are far off. Jesus has commanded that the Gospel be preached to all the ends of the earth and that disciples be made of all nations and that they all be baptized in the Triune Name. If you are sinner, if you are born of flesh and blood, if you are distressed by your sinful thoughts, angry words, and selfish actions then Jesus is for you. Hear God's own Word which has commanded and delivered to you the forgiveness of sins. Join the shepherds and the wise men who heard the good news and made haste to Jesus to receive and worship the Savior. Stand in wondrous awe before this child of Bethlehem who has come to save you and to pour out to you all the riches of His heavenly kingdom - life, salvation, peace, and eternal life.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

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