

4 January 2004
The Epiphany of our Lord (transferred)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Light Shining in the Darkness”
Text: Matthew 2:1-12 (Isaiah 60:1-2)

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

Last Sunday, the Holy Gospel from St. Matthew told us of King Herod’s reaction to the birth of Jesus. He sought to get rid of Jesus by ordering the slaughter of all the male babies in the region two years old and under.

Today, the Holy Gospel from St. Matthew told us of the reaction of the Wise Men to the birth of Jesus. They came and worshipped Him.

Last Sunday, we took note of the fact that we are, by nature, like King Herod. Because we are born in sin and are sin-filled, Jesus is a threat to us, to our autonomy and the kingship of our own lives, to the little kingdoms we have built for ourselves.

But **today**, take note of the fact that you are, by grace, like the Wise Men. Because by grace, you have heard the Word of God and believed. By grace, you have come to worship Jesus. By grace, you know that this King was born **for you**.

And that is really what the season of Epiphany is all about – the proclamation that this Jesus, this newborn King, this God-in-the-flesh, is **for you**. Herod didn’t believe that; the Wise Men did.

And still today, those are the only two kinds of people in the world . . . in God’s eyes. Who you are in God’s eyes has nothing to do with the color of one’s skin, the nation of origin, or any other man-made distinction. It is only this: those who are Christians, and those who are not. Those who believe in the one, true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and those who do not. Those who believe that this child in the manger is the Saviour, born **for you**, and those who do not.

And it has always been this way. There are those who belong to the true Church, the Church of Jesus Christ; and those who belong to the false church, the church of Satan. It is the church of Abel or the church of Cain. The church Herod or the church of the Wise

Men. The church of grace or the church of works.

By nature, we are members of the church of this world, the false church, the do-it-yourself church. The church of Adam which says that we don't need God but can become like gods ourselves. The church which says that we can save ourselves through our own works. We can be good enough. We can become advanced enough. We can become great enough. We can achieve enough. We need only put our minds to it and work together. And so it is with all the false religions of this world. . . . And for them, the child born in the manger? Thanks, but no thanks.

That is the darkness that the prophet Isaiah spoke about in the Old Testament reading that we heard earlier. The *thick* darkness. The darkness of sin that we are born into, and live in, so that we think it is the light. Our eyes have adjusted, we've gotten used to the darkness, so that it seems good to us. And so we toil in this darkness. To make the darkness better. . . . But it is still darkness. Maybe *better* darkness, but still darkness.

And of this we are reminded often, despite our best efforts. When the terror alert goes up to orange. When we hear of crime and murder of TV, or in our neighborhood. When we argue with our spouse. When we lose our temper with our children. When we hurt those we care about. When we discover the awful sin and hatred that we see in others living in our own hearts. . . . Many people comment that the world seems to be getting worse, not better. Why are we surprised? This is the darkness. The thick darkness.

But into this darkness, says Isaiah, "***your light has come.***" And notice what he says there: not, "a light has come," but "your light has come." Or in other words, the light **for you.**

That light first shined in the darkness when God's Word came to Adam and Eve in the darkness of the Garden of Eden. When God's Word pierced the darkness of sin they had created and promised them a Saviour. That light continued to shine throughout the time of the Old Testament, as God sent His prophets to speak His Word and shine the light of His promises and His faithfulness. That is the light that, by God's grace, shined on the Wise Men. Through the conquest and captivity and deportation of His people from Israel to Babylon, God had His Word and His promises taken East, and the Wise Men heard, and believed. So that when the light of God's Star shined in the Bethlehem sky, and the light of God's love shined in the flesh of Jesus, the Wise Men knew that this child was **for them.** That He was born, according to God's Word, **for you.**

So they came and fell on their knees before God their Saviour. They knew that their **wisdom** was as nothing next to the wisdom of God in this child. They knew that their

journey was as nothing next to the journey this child had taken to earth from heaven. They knew that their **works** were as nothing next to the work that this child would perform for them. And they knew that their **treasures** were as nothing next to the treasure that had been given to them here by God. By grace they had heard His Word, by grace they had seen His light, and by grace they had been led to the Immanuel, God with us.

And this is the light that continues to shine in the darkness today, through the preaching of God's Word. As God's Word is proclaimed in the darkness of this world, that Word is the light that is still piercing the darkness of sin in the hearts of people everywhere . . . and making Wise Men out of Herods.

And it has shined on you! And by grace, you have believed this word, and have come to worship Him, the One born **for you**. And so you come and fall before God your Saviour. Like the Wise Men, your wisdom, your journey, your works, your treasures, whatever you are or have or have done, is nothing. *But this One, born for you, is everything.* He is your light, your life, your forgiveness, your hope, your Saviour. For He is **for you**. **For you** in His life. **For you** on the cross. **For you** in His resurrection and ascension. And by grace through faith in Him and His work for you, your church membership has been transferred – from the church of this world, the church of Herod, the church of Satan, to the church of Jesus Christ.

And that was not your doing, but His doing. As God took His Word to the Wise Men in the East, so He took His Word to you in Holy Baptism. As the Wise Men were led to Jesus in flesh and blood in the manger by God's light and Word, so you have been led to Jesus' body and blood on the altar by God's light and Word. As they Wise Men fell before Him unworthily, so you fall before Him unworthily, in repentance. . . . And so led to Christ in faith, it is we who receive from Him the greatest gift of all: the forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of life eternal.

And this *epiphany*, this revelation, of God's Son and what He has come to do, is not just for a few, but for all. For all who are still held captive in the church of this world, the church of Herod, the church of Satan, the church of works and slavery and fear. To free those still held in the bondage of sin. And so the preaching of God's Word continues. The preaching of this promise, this hope, this Saviour. This preaching that has freed you and I. This preaching which is not just words, but the very power of God for salvation. Not because of the gifts and abilities of the preachers – but because God the Holy Spirit has promised to be in His Word, and work in the hearts of those who hear.

And so the Word is sent – it cannot remain silent. And so Paul was sent, as we heard in

the Epistle, to proclaim this Word, this light, to all. Pastors are called and sent today, to proclaim this Word, this light, to all. And you are sent – as parents, friends, co-workers, neighbors, in all the vocations God has placed you in. . . . And in those ways the light is shining in the darkness. It has shined on you, and shines through you. Still today making Wise Men out of Herods; making sons out of slaves; making saints out of sinners.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.