

8 January 2006  
The Epiphany of our Lord (transferred)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Bowling Head, Heart, and Knees in Faith”

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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

The Early Church marked many significant sites in the Holy Land by building a church on those sites. Events in the life of Jesus, or places where miracles took place, often have their own churches. And so there is a *Church of the Holy Sepulcher*, over the site thought to be Jesus' tomb. There is a church where Jesus is thought to have delivered the Sermon on the Mount. And many others. But perhaps the most interesting of these churches is the *Church of the Holy Nativity* in Bethlehem. It is the *oldest* church in the Holy Land still in use, but what makes it most unique and interesting is that in order to enter this church, you must go through a door that is very low and small. When it was first built, the church had a normal door – very tall and stately. But after Muslim horsemen rode into the church to disrupt the worshipers gathered there, the doors were made much smaller, to prevent this from happening again. But they weren't just made small – they were made *so low* that every adult desiring to enter the building had to bow down low to pass under the threshold. The only way now, still today, to enter the Church of the Nativity is to bow ones head and stoop down. And so the door of this Church is called the “Humility Door” for, it is said, when you enter the Church of the Nativity, you must bow down and leave your pride at the door.

When I heard of that, I immediately thought of the Wise Men. You know the well-known story – or the basic facts, at least, from hearing it every year, and from the Christmas Carols we hear so much. These Wise Men, or Magi, or Kings, followed a star from the East – a star that indicated to them that the King of the Jews had been born. “***We saw His star,***” the Wise Men told King Herod. And after the Scriptures were consulted to find out where God had revealed the Christ was to be born, they went to Bethlehem, found the house and the child with Mary His mother . . . and then we hear that remarkable line: “***and they fell down and worshiped Him.***” In humility, they bowed their heads, their hearts, and their knees before *who*? A child who was probably still in diapers, was probably only beginning to walk, and could only say a few words. If such a child had been in a castle, or surrounded by wealth and riches, we could perhaps understand! But it was in lowly Bethlehem, in a regular house, with a regular mother. And yet these visitors, who were probably of high position, mighty, wealthy, wise, and had seen a great

deal of the world, and the rich and powerful of the world, nevertheless *leave their pride at the door*, and ***fall down and worship Him***. For faith leaves no room for pride.

And so it is still today. **Faith leaves no room for pride, and pride no room for faith.** Those who would be wise men today must come in faith, and check your pride at the door. *Or better yet* – come with your pride, and then confess it; repent of it; and let the faith and forgiveness of God crush it. That you too may not stand on who you are, or what you have accomplished, or the stature you may have achieved in the world . . . but ***fall down and worship Him***. For whoever you are, or whatever you have accomplished, or whatever others think of you; whether you are a Wise Man, a Magi, or a King; it is all nothing in comparison to the glory of this child. The glory of this child which is hidden to the eyes of this prideful world, but revealed to the eyes of faith. For if you want to find God, you will not find Him by looking up, or by trying to climb to where you think He is. *The Magi did not find Him in Jerusalem*. No, you must see Him where He is willing to descend for us. To tiny Bethlehem, in a manger, in a house, in the weakness and humility of our human flesh and bone. **This is your God.**

To this faith says yes; pride says no. For our sinful, stiff-necked pride wants God to be who we want Him to be, and do what we want Him to do. Pride wants to approach Him on our terms.

+ Not His Word, *our* word. Not His will, *our* will. Not His work, *our* work. Not His life, *our* life. Not His forgiveness, *our* improvement.

+ Not His Church, *our* Church! Not His Supper, *our* supper. Not His ways, *my* way. Not His weakness, *my* ability. Not His humility, *my* dignity.

+ Not His cross, *my* success. Not His plan, *my* plan. Not in His time, in *my* time. Not His suffering, *my* victorious life. Not His wisdom, *my* wisdom. *Not by faith, but by sight.*

Such pride and stiff-necks cannot enter and see. Such pride and stiff-necks see only the *foolishness* of how God has chosen to come to us, and work for us, and save us. And so **such pride and stiff-necks must be put to death in confession and repentance**, that bowing head, and heart, and knee – in faith – we may see our Saviour as He wants to be seen. In a manger, in diapers, rejected by those who thought they knew better, crowned with thorns, strapped to the scourging post, hung to die on a cross. Our Saviour who calls water a baptism of adoption and forgiveness; who calls bread and wine His body and blood; who forgives and speaks and gives His gifts in small, lowly churches, by the hands of poor and lowly men He deigns to call pastors. Surely, our pride says, we can do better than that! Surely we can do things that make more sense – that appeal more, and have

more power! Surely, the glory of God needs a more glorious package!

But ask a wise man – the Wise Men – about that, and you will find quite a different answer. *They went to the capital city. They went to the palace. They went to the high and mighty. And God was not there.* Human wisdom and thinking got it wrong. God's Word put them right. And faith born of that Word puts pride to death, and causes kings to worship a child. To bow head, and heart, and knee not to what is seen but to what is unseen. And to worship, taking human reason and wisdom captive to the Word of God. The Word of God made flesh for us.

And that's what Epiphany is all about. The glory of God made flesh for us. The glory of God who though big, became small for us. As small and weak and vulnerable as a little child.

There's a children's song that is sometimes taught, that says: "*My God is so big, so strong, and so mighty . . . there's nothing my God cannot do.*" And that's true, as far as it goes, to teach that God's greatness makes it possible for God to rescue us. But I think part of the reason why children love Christmas so much is the very opposite – because God became small for them. God became just like them. Because their world is full of parents like me, talking down to them, telling them what to do, demanding good behaviour – and my *love* . . . perhaps . . . sometimes . . . oftentimes . . . doesn't show through. But at Christmas, what do children see? What do they hear? "*My God is so small, so weak, and so vulnerable – just like me! – there's nothing my God will not do*" There's nothing my God will not do for the sake of my salvation. To make me His own.

And maybe that's why we love Christmas so much, as children of God, with a child-like faith. In the midst of a world that talks down to us, telling us what to do, demanding, ordering, shoving, stepping on or over whoever gets in the way . . . ! And we wonder: Doesn't God see? Doesn't God care? And then we see once again at Christmas, my God does know. My God does see. My God is here, for me. But not only at Christmas, but each and every week, here for me. On the altar, in His Word, with His care and forgiveness. And in these weak and ordinary looking things, here with His greatness, His power, and His glory. Pride will never see this, but keep banging its head against the wall, looking for something more glorious, more worthy! But faith, born of the Word, bows the head, the heart, and the knee, and sees! Here is God for me. Here is my God, once crucified for my sins, now risen for my justification, for me. To hear, to eat, to drink, to wash, that I may live!

**And *we fall down and worship Him.***

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.

*(Thanks to Rev. Scott Murray and his Memorial Moments for some of the thoughts used in this sermon.)*