

3 January 2016
The Epiphany of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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Jesu Juva

“The Kings Who Conquers Death”

Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

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

When Old Testament Israel heard the words we heard today spoken by the prophet Isaiah, how could they not be excited? Light, wealth, glory . . . if this had been a campaign speech, Isaiah would surely have been elected! Talk about *making Israel great again!* His words sound like Solomon’s grand and glorious kingdom 2.0. For in his day there was light and wealth and glory, too. More, in fact, than there ever had been. Kings and queens were coming from all over to see, and to hear the wisdom that would flow forth from Solomon. One of them was the Queen of Sheba - a country that Isaiah here mentions by name. This is great stuff, Isaiah.

But when would it be fulfilled? And how?

Well, generation after generation would come and go. In the coming years, the southern kingdom of Judah that Isaiah was preaching to would fall just as the northern kingdom of Israel had. There would be the destruction of Jerusalem and more importantly, the Temple. There would be exile as prisoners of war. It would get worse before it got better. And those hoping for a return to the heyday of Solomon and his kingdom would be disappointed. That ship had sailed, and that’s not, in fact, what God was talking about here at all.

For an earthly kingdom - no matter how great and glorious - is too small for God . . . and it’s too small for us. *For us who die.* For God can make you rich, but you’re still going to die. He can make you powerful, but you’re still going to die. He can make you popular, He can give you great knowledge, He can make you famous, He could make you king of the world if He wanted to . . . and you’re still going to die. So maybe your casket will be encrusted with jewels, or a great marble monument will mark your body’s resting place. The worms who will see it and the birds who will perch on it won’t care. And sooner or later, those who come after you won’t either.

But your God will still care. All that stuff may be what we want, and God gives it to some; to whom He chooses. But it’s not what we need. The kingdom we need, the King we need, is **one who rules over death**. Lots of kings and kingdoms and rulers and leaders can kill, and they do. History is filled with such stories and atrocities that couldn’t

even be imagined until they happened. The prince of this world is all about death, too . . . just ask Adam and Eve. But one who rules *over* death, one who *conquers* death, one who can give *life after* death - that is the King we need.

And it is the King we have. He wasn't elected. He wasn't even *wanted* when he came. In fact, He became one of those historical accounts of one who was violently and atrociously killed - strung up on a cross. But that man assumed the throne when He rose from the dead; when He conquered death and began His rule. He didn't *look* like a king - born in Bethlehem; wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; growing up on the wrong side of the tracks, a poor kid in Nazareth. Many would say He didn't *act* like a king - hanging out with notorious sinners, undesirables, commoners, losers. But a different kind of kingdom requires a different kind of King.

And so some 7 centuries after Isaiah spoke the words, his prophecy *began* to be fulfilled. We heard the well-known story from Matthew again today. ***Wise men from the east come to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"*** The well-known Christmas carol calls them kings, agreeing with Isaiah. The original Greek uses the word *Magi* - magicians, maybe; astrologers or astronomers, perhaps. They did follow a star, after all. Maybe they were all of the above. But like us, who they were was not as important as how God used them and the faith He gave to them. The faith to fall on their knees and worship when they entered not a palace but a common house; when they saw not royal robes but common clothes; when they saw not riches and signs of power, but poverty and weakness. But faith believes more than the eye can see. And then they gave Him their gifts: ***gold and frankincense and myrrh.***

But notice: *that's not what Isaiah said would happen.* Isaiah had said that ***they shall bring gold and frankincense,*** - but instead of myrrh he says - ***and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.*** But, in fact, they really are the same thing. By putting these two together, it is, in fact, the *myrrh* that proclaims the good news and praise of the Lord. For gold and incense were common for kings and kingdoms - nothing surprising there. But myrrh marked this King, Jesus, as different. It marked and foretold His death. For we when Jesus died, myrrh was brought as one of the spices used for His burial.

But that is exactly the good news He has come to proclaim, and the reason for his praise. Not just that He is a King, but a King born to die. A King who dies to defeat death. The King we need. So by bringing myrrh, the Wise Men really were fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. But it was just the beginning of the fulfillment . . .

For Isaiah's prophecy didn't *conclude* with the coming of the Wise Men, but continues even to this day. For ***the Lord and His glory*** continue to ***rise upon people*** as His Word is proclaimed, young and old are baptized, and His kingdom grows. ***Nations are coming to His light*** as people from every nation and language and culture are hearing of Him and the Spirit works in their hearts and enlightens the darkness there. ***Sons and daughters are***

coming - you'll see it again today as sons toddle up the aisle and *daughters are carried on the hip* to the altar where our Lord is in His Body and Blood. And *hearts still thrill and exult* over the forgiveness of sins and the victory over death proclaimed and given here. The Epiphany of our Lord, His revealing, *began* with the shepherds and the Wise Men, but it hasn't stopped. And it won't stop - He won't stop - until He comes again, and sin and death are conquered and abolished once and for all.

And when will that day be? It may still lie 7 centuries in the future, as it did when Isaiah spoke his words. Or maybe it will be in 7 minutes. We don't know. But we don't need to know. We have our King and His victory, and that's enough.

And *this is the mystery now made known to you*, as Paul said - the unsearchable riches God has for you in Christ Jesus. Riches not of gold and frankincense, though He may give those, too. But even more, the good news of **the life** He has for you - that He won for you and gives to you. That the one born King of the Jews is not a Jewish king only, but the King of all nations, of all people, of all who are born and die, that they might be born again and rise from the dead in Him. That they be citizens of a kingdom that will have no end.

So though now it may be hidden, as it was in ages past, it is revealed - *epiphanied* - to you, by faith. Just as in the days when **Isaiah** spoke of it, though it remained hidden for centuries. And when **Paul** spoke of it, though it remained hidden at that time under persecution and imprisonment. And still **today**, though preached it remains hidden under death. Your death and mine. We preach victory over death yet still die. Christians are being persecuted today too, and beheaded, and get the same sicknesses and diseases as everyone else. And burdens, struggles, trials, troubles - I don't need to speak to you about them. The Herods of this world see all this and scoff at our message, dispute our claims, and prefer kingdoms that can be **seen**.

But those Wise Men who took a knee that day knew that here was a King and a kingdom greater than any other, because it was unlike any other. Because it wasn't in a time and place, but transcended them. They gave gifts, but knew they had received far more than they had given.

And so it is for us. Gifts greater than gold, frankincense, and myrrh are here for us, for hidden in water and words and bread and wine *are life* - the forgiveness of sins and with that the promise of a life that death cannot end. And so we, too, fall down and worship Him by receiving what He brings for us, bending the knee and bowing the head and heart before Him - our manged King, our crucified King, our risen King.

So as we begin a New Year, now just a few days old, it's easy to be like the people of Isaiah's day, wishing for a new start, a new 2.0 kingdom. And this being an election year, the fever is going to get even worse as the year goes on and as we look to and hope for

not a king, but a president, who will provide that for us. But that new day, that new start, will not come with a rising America, but with the rising of the dead. Not just when all the dead will rise on the Last Day, but already here and now when we who are dead in our trespasses and sins rise with Christ to a new life. A new life of confidence, without fear or worry or anxiety about a future that is in our Lord's hands. A new life when we realize that the best thing we can do with our riches is - like the wise men - give them away. And receive riches far different, but also far greater. Riches that will never run out or go away. Riches that will last beyond death and the grave. Riches that we cannot even begin to imagine. The riches of our Saviour and His kingdom. His light and wealth and glory. Riches that though hidden now, are already yours.

So this New Year that lay before us, will you still hang onto the old? The old life instead of your new life? Old riches instead of new riches? The old king - you - instead of your newborn king? Yeah, you will. And you won't. When you do, **repent**. Let go. Remember your baptism and who you really are, and come and receive the forgiveness and new life you need in the Body and Blood of the Lord. And when you don't, **rejoice!** Rejoice in the Lord and His new life you are living. Rejoice in His Spirit and kingdom. And rejoice that the Lord has made you a wise man too.

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