

6 January 2019
The Epiphany of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Get it? Get it!”

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

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

Matthew is a lousy historian. He tells us this story of the wise men, but he leaves out so many details. For example, how long after Jesus was born did the wise men come? How long and how far did they have to travel? How old was Jesus when they arrived? And where were they from? *From the east* isn't very precise, Matthew. Was it Babylon, Persia, Arabia, or somewhere else? And how did they know to follow that star? What made them do that? And *them* - how many of *them* were there? Three? One for each gift? Or were there more than that? Isaiah told us today of *a multitude of camels* that would cover the land. Was that their entourage? And did these wise men even travel together? Or did they come separately and converge in Jerusalem? C'mon Matthew! Do your research. Get the facts. Tell us more.

Yes, Matthew is a lousy historian. But he is a great Gospel writer. For he knows this story really isn't about the wise men - it's about Jesus. And so what's important in this story isn't the details about the wise men, it's that God is here, among us, in human flesh and blood. God revealed this to the wise men, and He uses the wise men to reveal it now to us.

Which, maybe, sounds funny. Because *we know*, right? We know the story of Christmas, and how Jesus was born, and that He is the Son of God. We just celebrated that. We know all the great hymns and carols that talk about that. We already know all that, right?

Except, well . . . the Christmas lights that lit up our houses and streets and trees are going dark and being taken down. The troubles and cares - and government shutdown - that were overshadowed by Christmas joy are still there. Doubts and fears come roaring back and cast dark shadows over our lives. And that darkness can get pretty deep. The darkness of sin. The darkness of death or the threat of it. The darkness of life without the light of God's love and forgiveness. Yes, Jesus was born, but that was so long ago and so far away. And where is He now, when *I* need Him? In my loneliness. In my hopelessness. In my uncertainty. Yes, He was born. Everyone knows that. But was He born for me?

Oh, we know that too, right? We're Christians! But that does not make you immune from the devil's temptations and his efforts to drive you to despair and away from God. In fact,

it makes you a target of them. His hissing accusation that you call yourself a Christian, but look at you! You're no Christian! You'd be better if you were. Stronger in your faith. His assertion that you're not worthy of Jesus. You're too sinful. You repent, and yet do the same sins over again, don't you? See? Unworthy! His reminder that if you were really a Christian, you'd read your Bible more, pray more, give more - of yourself and what you have. But you don't, do you? You keep saying you will, but then . . . what? Everything and everyone else gets bumped up ahead of God, don't they? That makes them false gods, Christian . . . Christian! Yeah, that's a good one! You should be a stand-up comedian! That's what he says. That's what he wants you to believe.

And what makes all that so effective is that we know all those accusations are true. We're not what we should be. We're not good enough. Not even close. But that's not the end of the story.

So we can learn something from the Wise Men. But not what you think, or what you may so often hear. Not to give our best to Jesus. Our gold, frankincense, and myrrh, or whatever counts as those things today. Not that "wise men still seek him" as the saying goes, and so pat ourselves on the back that we, here today, are so wise. As if we had anything to do with it. Not that we should seek signs from God in the stars, and not that we should travel great distances and overcome any obstacle to get to Jesus. None of that. If the Wise Men were here today and heard you say any of that, they would wonder what is wrong with you. Because all those things are about them, what they did; and about us, what we should do. And to the Wise Men, their journey was about only one thing: **Jesus**. They came to *fall down and worship Him*.

And why did they? Well, for one reason only: not because they were so wise, and not because they were so good - but simply because **God wanted them there**. God wanted them to know that their Saviour had come. Not just the Saviour of the Jews or of the world, the Saviour of the wise or the Saviour of the good, but *their* Saviour. That's why He sent the star. That's why He had Micah write his prophecy about Bethlehem. And that's why they fell down and worshiped him. You may fall down before a king, but you only worship a god.

And everyone today does. Everyone has a god or gods that they worship. For *whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god* (Large Catechism). And so some popular ones today are happiness, success, popularity, wealth, job, health, family, pride, power, self-fulfillment. All these things are not wrong or bad in and of themselves, but they can be, if they become our gods. If they become what we live for at all costs, and where we find our meaning and value. And they make lousy gods. For when they go away, or are taken away, when we can't achieve them, or get enough of them, or when they fail us - then what? Well that's when the darkness descends. A darkness that can get pretty deep.

So epiphany comes to show us, reveal to us, teach us - again! - your God. The one, true God. The only one who will not let you down, leave you, or fail you. The only one who keeps His Word and all His promises - even when that means being born as a baby and dying on a cross. If just any god will do, the wise men had gods where they came from, so why bother? And if any religion will do, why make the journey to Bethlehem? No. These wise men, these wealthy men, these men who seemed to have it all, *knew they didn't*. **They fell down and worshiped the one who did.** And who could give them what they needed most. It didn't matter that He was just a child. It didn't matter that He was poor. It didn't matter that He wasn't in the capital and surrounded by royal trappings. God's Word trumped all of that. And the Word made flesh was the gift that had come for them.

And for you. *Arise, shine, for your light has come*, Isaiah said. And this light is for all people, Paul said. To enlighten your darkness, no matter how deep. The light of hope in despair. The light of life in the midst of death. The light of forgiveness in the mire of sin. The light of peace in the midst of fear. For Jesus is everything that we are not. Jesus is everything our false gods are not. Here to give you what you need.

Which is why the wise men fell down and worshiped Him, and why we do the same. For that's what worship is - not what we do for God, but what God does for us. In worship, we receive what we need. We come as sinners for forgiveness. We come unworthy to be made worthy. We come with doubts and fears to hear His Word of promise and assurance. We come hungry and are fed by Him, His own Body and Blood. No matter how rich you are in the things of this world, you - and the wise men, too! - come to Jesus as beggars in need. And Jesus, poor in the things of this world, gives us what we need: Himself, His life, and His kingdom. Which means we come as beggars and leave as princes.

So the wise men left wiser and wealthier than when they had come. For they saw what no earthly learning could reveal to them - their Saviour. And they received what no earthly treasures could buy - eternal life. And so do you.

And that's what Matthew wants you to know. The details about the wise men? Meh, he'll leave that to someone else. But *they fell down and worshiped Him*. They fell down and worshiped Him! Yes, that's what matters. For that's why Jesus came. To give to them. To raise them. To be their God and Saviour. And yours, too. And the rest? Everything else will fall into place when you know that you and your life, who you are and what you do, is all really about Jesus and what He is doing for you. The Son of God born to die a sinners death, that you who die a sinners death be born from above and rise to live as sons and daughters of God. To receive this gift from Him in the forgiveness of your sins. *For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation* (Small Catechism).

So Epiphany, that's when the light goes on. The *real* light - not just the Christmas lights

that shine only for awhile, but the light we need all year round. The light in our darkness. The light that changes everything. The light that worship is not about us, but about Jesus. That it's not about giving, but receiving. That we don't worship at church, we worship at Jesus, where He has promised to be for us. Whether that is in a house in Bethlehem, a cathedral in a big city, or a borrowed building in Vienna. That the baby Jesus isn't the one who *will be* king, but already is. That in the manger or on His mother's lap, He is not the one who *will be* the Saviour, but already is. And that we are not those who *will be* sons and daughters of God, but already are. And that we are not those who *will have* eternal life, but that you are already living that life that not even death will be able to end. Not because you can do it, but because it's Jesus' life, given to you. The one born into your death that you be born into His life. Epiphany shines the light on all of that for us, that you get it. That you get Him.

And then maybe, just maybe, God will use you as one of His "wise men," when you fall down and worship Him. For others may not know your history, your story, but see you do this - and so see in Jesus the one who saves, the one who gives hope, the one who has come to lighten our darkness by His mercy, forgiveness, and love. That we get it. That we get it (*pointing to mind*) and that we get it (*receiving motion with hands*).

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.