

5 January 2020  
The Epiphany of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Who Sought Who?”

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

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

Epiphany. Wise Men. The star. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You know the story. It's part of the Christmas story we all know so well. Our nativity scenes wouldn't be complete without those visitors from the east in their royal robes and turbans, on their knees, offering their gifts to the baby in the manger.

It's really kind of an ordinary scene, when you think about it. A couple away from home with a newborn child - that part's not so strange. I saw one of those on Friday at the airport. Actually, just a young mother with a baby wrapped to her chest, a backpack hanging from one arm and a suitcase in the other! That's who Mary would have been if Joseph hadn't stepped up.

And the rest of the scene. Doting shepherds and wealthy wise men gazing at the child. That may not be historically accurate - the shepherds and the wise men weren't there at the same time - but we get the gazing at the child. We like babies. And again, actually, that happened to me on one of my flights on Friday. There was a baby in the row in front of me, less than a year old, and the woman next to me and I had fun smiling at her and enjoying her smile back at us. Babies get a lot of attention.

The thing about Epiphany, though, is that baby the shepherds and wise men are looking at - that's God! God in the flesh. God here in the world. God in that manger, in a house, for all the world to see. Poor Jewish shepherds, wealthy Gentile wise men, you and me today. But the Christmas season goes by so fast - only twelve days! It's not enough. So Epiphany gives us a little more time with God the baby before we move on to God the man and God doing what God came to do - be the Saviour of those poor Jewish shepherds, wealthy Gentile wise men, and you and me today. So today we linger by the nativity scene just a little longer, and marvel . . .

*What child is this* (LSB #370)? *This, this is Christ the king . . . The King of kings [who] salvation brings . . . Good news for all the world.*

Except it's not. Well it is, but not everyone knows it. For some, this baby means trouble. Herod, for one. Brett told us about him last Sunday; about how deranged and murderous he

was. Herod was like the people on the airplane who don't smile but groan when they see a baby getting on. The people who think that baby is only going to give them a headache - two hours of crying and screaming. When Herod heard about Jesus' birth, *he groaned*. A rival king. And one that is already drawing attention from other countries. So Herod groans. And when Herod groans, Jerusalem quakes. They know what that means. Nothing good is going to come from this.

Except it is. For while Jerusalem was right to quake - Herod did what Herod does: he murders all those babies in his attempt to get rid of Jesus - in the end, Jesus dies not at the hand of Herod, but lays down His life for the life of the world. That our quaking may cease, that the sins we are ashamed of and afraid of be forgiven, and that we have peace with both God and one another. Which is good. And we know it. That's the story, the truth we come to hear and be reminded of here every week.

Because sometimes we groan. Like Herod. Instead of the joy of the wise men, we find ourselves groaning. I know I do. Life can be hard. Life can be disappointing. Life can be ping-ponging from one struggle to the next. And sometimes, truthfully, Jesus makes life in this world *harder* - when we're swimming against the cultural tide that wants to make us go the way of sin instead of the way of God. For much of what the world thinks and believes is not the truth of God's Word. So while we smile at the baby in the manger, we groan at the reality of life.

That's okay. You're allowed to groan. I suspect the wise men groaned a time or two as well. I don't know how long their journey from the east was, but it couldn't have been easy. Maybe they asked more than a few times: *are we there yet?* And they probably groaned when they got to Jerusalem only to discover they were in the wrong place, and they had to travel even longer and farther. Like when my direct flight to Reagan got canceled on Friday and we had to be delayed and routed through Philadelphia. Yeah, I groaned.

But the Word of God answered their groaning. Because the reality of this story is that **it wasn't the wise men seeking Jesus, it was Jesus seeking the wise men**. Jesus directing them and guiding them and pulling them in. Jesus who put the star there for them. Jesus who had it lead them to Judea. And Jesus who had the prophet Micah pen the words that told them about Bethlehem. All the wisdom of the wise men wouldn't have gotten them there. Only Jesus could. And Jesus did. Jesus wanted them there. To see Him. To see their King. To see their God. To see their Saviour. Even if He was only pint-sized at the time! But don't let the appearance fool you. It was the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God in that pint-sized body. The one come to take on sin, death, and the devil . . . and win.

Which is what St. Paul was all about and wanted all the world to know. This mystery of God in human flesh and bone. And that this King of the Jews isn't just the King of the Jews, but the King of a *new* Israel. A new people not confined to the borders of a nation,

but spread throughout the world. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, from the four corners of the earth. He has come with light for everyone. *To*, as Paul said to us in the reading from Ephesians, *bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things*. Or in other words, what Jesus *did* He is doing *still* - directing and guiding and pulling people to Himself. To see Him. To see their King. To see their God. To see their Saviour.

Now I don't know if Jesus is still using stars to do it, but there are lots of just-as-stunning ways Jesus is doing it today. How people come to the church. Maybe how *you* wound up here. How God's Word is reaching people today. How Jesus is pulling groaning people - groaning under all kinds of burdens in this world - to himself, to give them peace and hope and joy.

And for us today, it's not in seeing the pint-sized Jesus in the manger, but in seeing the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God on the cross and in the grave. Dead. Buried. Because that **pint-sized Jesus** took our **king-sized sins** and allowed them to crush Him instead of us. And I think He probably groaned a time or two when He was under the whip, when His hands and feet were hammered through, when He was crowned with thorns, and while He hung on that cross for hours. Jesus knows your groaning, and He wants you to know His joy.

The wise men had that joy. And it was not little. Matthew says that *they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*. Which is kind of an odd phrase. You kind of get the feeling that Matthew was searching for words to describe how great the joy of the wise men was. But you kind of understand it too with the gifts they gave. For when you receive so much you want to repay the giver, somehow. But you can't quite give enough. You can't give enough. But you try. Because that's what joy does. Not that their life was all peaches and cream - they still had to dodge Herod on their way out of Bethlehem. Joy doesn't mean the groaning and the struggles go away. But it does help. It gives us something greater than them. For we have someone greater than them.

For that pint-sized Jesus who took our king-sized sins and died with them, rose from the dead. And so there is someone greater than all those things that cause you to groan and struggle. That's why the disciples and the women had the same great joy the wise men had - they saw their Jesus, they saw their King, they saw their God, they saw their Saviour, *alive*. So even though the disciples had a tough road ahead of them, and even though Paul was in prison for his preaching, they all had this joy, and along with it boldness and confidence and peace. No matter what happened next.

And now it's yours. That's why Jesus has directed and guided and pulled you here. To give you Himself. To give you His forgiveness. To give you this joy. And for you, it's not in seeing pint-sized Jesus or even crucified Jesus, but **bread and wine Jesus**. You may think that's harder to see and believe, that God is in this bread and wine, but is it? Harder than

for the wise men to believe that baby is God in the flesh? Harder to believe than that bloody and dying man on the cross is God in the flesh? All our wisdom couldn't get us to believe *any* of that. Only Jesus can. The Jesus who had the prophet Micah write about Bethlehem, and the Jesus who had His apostles write about His Body and Blood here for you. Where He gives you His forgiveness, His life, and His joy. That you be wise men, wise women, and wise children. By His Word.

So now you too bring your gifts to Him. How could you not? **Great joy breeds great gifts.** And the great gifts we have received help us to see the things of this world rightly - that they're really not worth holding onto. And **great joy breeds great speech** - the gift of praise. That's the other thing the wise men gave, according to Isaiah. *They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.* That's why we can't seem to get enough Christmas songs and hymns. Not the innocuous ones about snow and trees and lights - we get tired of them pretty quickly. But the ones that speak of what really happened and what it means for us.

The Gradual for this season actually sums all that up pretty well: ***Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!*** Why? ***For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.*** Therefore: ***Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; [Speak! And] bring an offering, - a gift! - and come into his courts!***

Come into His courts, you shepherds, into the stable where He was born. Come into his courts, you wise men, into the house where you were led. And come into His courts you, and all people, to where your Saviour is for you today. Where He has pulled you to see Him and receive Him. That seeing and receiving Him *today*, you praise Him *forever*. When you join the angels and archangels, the shepherds and the wise men, and all the company of heaven, in a scene that is anything but ordinary - around not a manger or a cross, but the Lamb upon His throne. When His Epiphany, His revealing, is finally and fully complete.

Until then, we give and we praise, we struggle and we groan, we hear and eat and drink, and we rejoice. For the Lord has sought you out and brought you here. To see Him. To receive Him. To be His. Wise men, wise women, wise children, indeed.

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.