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The Epiphany of our Lord

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“What Makes Wise Men Wise”

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.

There is a saying that is used quite a bit these days . . . *What did he know and when did he know it?* You’ve heard that in the media and especially with regard to politics and investigations.

Well I’d like to kinda, sorta, apply that to the Wise Men, as we think about them a bit today. To help us think about how the Lord *epiphanied*, or *made Himself known*, to them.

You know the story well, of the visit of the Wise Men. We hear it read here every year in church, and we sing of it in our favorite Christmas carols. The Wise Men are there in our Nativity scenes, and are such a precious part of the story. But let’s think a little deeper . . . that we might not only know of them but learn from them today. So *what did they know and when did they know it?* What kind of king did they expect when they saw the star and then followed it?

Well, the Scriptures don’t give us all those details, but we can know a few things. For if a star announces a birth, and then leads you to the place, you would think this child more than a mere man. There is something otherworldly, something divine going on here. And so the Wise Men come not just to see a child, but to worship Him. And who you worship is God, or a god.

But still, what kind of a god is this? A god of beauty, certainly, like the beauty of the stars that announced His birth. And a god of order, who sets in order the stars and the constellations. Powerful, certainly, if He a god who can do this. But what kind of power? And how does he wield it? Like a despot, or in mercy? Is he a god to fear or a god to embrace? Would their gifts be in thanksgiving or to appease?

So many questions the Wise Men must have had as they started on their journey.

They are the same questions we must have of God, *if* all we can know of Him is from what we can see. That’s what theology calls the natural knowledge of God. We see the majesty of the mountains, the vastness of space, the beauty of another person, the stillness of the night, the variety of the animals - and we know God is powerful, creative,

intelligent - but still there is a mystery about Him. For yes He is all these things, but *what is He* for me? *Do I matter anything to Him? Does He do anything for me? Or expect me to do for Him? Should I cower in fear before Him, or welcome Him as a friend?* All this nature cannot tell us. When we see beauty and stillness, we see a friendly God. When we see power and destruction, we see a fearsome God. Which of these is the true God? Who is He?

Nature cannot tell us that. **It takes an epiphany** to tell us that. For God to reveal Himself. To show us who He is *for us*. That we know Him as He is.

So the Wise Men received a **first epiphany, of the star**. But then they received more. For when they arrived in Jerusalem, the logical place for a king, it was revealed to them in the Word of God that not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, is where this king would be. That's revealing in it's own way. That this God doesn't do things how we expect, or where we expect. He is quite different than us. Yet He has come to us. That's a good thing, isn't it?

Isaiah said that too - that God has come to us. ***Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*** The glory of the Lord is not far away, but has come to us. But still, it came on Mt. Sinai, too. And that was terrifying! So much so that the people of Israel begged Moses to go talk to God so they could stay far away from the glory and the voice of God. It was too much for them.

But Isaiah says still more: that God and His glory have come *to lighten the darkness*. That's a good thing. Darkness can be frightening. Just ask a child. But darkness can also be your friend, if you're trying to hide. Like Adam and Eve after they sinned. Like we try to hide our sins. There are some things we don't want to come to light. Our shameful deeds, sordid thoughts, awful words, sinful desires. We don't want them to be exposed.

But, Isaiah says more. Children are coming to this light. ***Sons and daughters*** who cannot even walk yet, who must ***be carried on the hip***. He is not here as fearsome, but welcoming even children. That ***hearts thrill and exult***.

This is **the second epiphany** of the Lord, how God revealed Himself before His coming. **In His Word**. Telling us who He is *for us*. Telling us what we could never otherwise know. Not only through the prophet Isaiah, but many others. That you do matter to Him. That He is a promising God. A loving God. A giving God. A God fighting for us against sin, death, and evil. A caring God.

The Wise Men received *both* epiphanies. First, the star, the natural epiphany. Then the second, the Word, after they arrived in Jerusalem and asked about this king. But **the greatest epiphany** was yet to come . . . When they get to Bethlehem and see this king . . . God revealing Himself to them *like this!*

He is a small child. Can He even walk? Can He talk? He is poor. In a house, not a palace. No matter. They fall down and worship Him, and give Him gifts - not in fear but in joy. Gifts worth many times more than all they can see there. Not your typical king, to say the least!

But maybe this is exactly what made the Wise Men wise. That they didn't let their own thoughts and expectations get in the way. That when they arrived at the house and saw a mere child - and a poor one at that! - they didn't burst out laughing and turn around and either begin looking for a *real* king or just go home. ***They fell down and worshiped Him.*** They didn't limit God to their own minds and thoughts, to their own little box, to their own perceptions. **They believe the epiphany**, as strange as it must have seemed to them.

And perhaps for this they received ridicule and were laughed at by others. Such foolish men who think themselves wise! First you leave your homes, not even knowing how long you will be gone or where you are going, and go off on this wild goose chase, following a star. Then you grown and supposedly wise men fall down before a child, when everyone knows it should be the other way around! And then you give Him gifts that obviously are too great for this poor family. What are you thinking?

And so people laugh today, at the church, at you. For thinking of God this way.

That you get up on Sunday mornings when you could be sleeping in or using that time to relax, and you not only get up, but travel - some of you a great distance, and sometimes through cold and rain and snow.

And you give your hard-earned treasure to the church. Not just what you can spare, but more than that. Not just what happens to be in your pocket, but much more. And you do without what many others have because you give your money away!

And you believe such old fashioned stuff! We know so much more now. You gotta change with the times, you know!

And then maybe most absurd of all, you think God is here, like this. In the water of Baptism, in words spoken, in the bread and wine of the Supper. You bow before *this*? *What are you thinking?* Not much of a God if that's what He's like, if that's where He is! You are fools. You should be wise like us, the world would say, and think differently of God.

But perhaps like the Wise Men, **this is exactly what makes us wise.** The wisdom of God and the wisdom of man are never going to be the same, never going to agree. He is perfect, we are sinful. He is all-knowing, we are limited. The power we seek is weakness

to God, and in His weakness is true power. Paul said that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:20-25), and maybe that is never so evident as here. Our own images of God, of what we think He must be like, what we think He must do, what we want to be true, get in the way of faith. But God has **epiphanied** Himself to us like this, so what will we believe? What *we* think, or what *God* has said?

Sadly, many reject the epiphany of God in His Word, and cling to what they think instead. It is common in our world today, to reject the Word of God in favor of the so-called wisdom of men, and it is a temptation for us, too. And the pressure to bend to the thinking of the world is no small thing. And at times, we do. If not by our actual words then by our silence. If not by our actions then by our inaction. When we are embarrassed by the truth and hide our faith because we want to be liked or esteemed; because we want to be strong, not weak.

Better is to follow the example of the Wise Men - to ***fall down and worship Him***. To bend the knees of our hearts and minds before Him. And in so doing, receive from Him a gift far greater than anything this world can give us - the gift of God Himself. A gift that, as Paul said today, is for all people. The world picks and chooses. Some in, some out. Some to admire, some to vilify. And that list constantly changes. Not so God. His gifts are for all people. Not just for good people, not just for a chosen few. But for Jew and Gentile alike. For all races, all nationalities, all languages. For big sinners and little sinners, young and old. Wise Men and fishermen.

And when God gives you Himself, you get this too: His forgiveness, His life, and His salvation. So His light arises upon you to expose your sin, but not just that! But to then take that sin and shame away. His light arises upon you who are dead in your trespasses and sins to give you new life and the hope of life to come - a life without end. His light arises upon you to save you from the darkness of the grave, the darkness of evil which so wants to envelope you and shroud you. The darkness which is frightening indeed. And so the light of Christ shines there too, that even looking into the grave - whether it is your own grave looming, or the grave of a loved one that you're standing next to - you have hope and even joy. That this is not the end. Jesus' empty grave epiphanies that for you. Gifts the world can never give.

All that in this poor child? We could never have claimed that if God had not epiphanied it to us. But this is exactly what God has said in His Word, and what this child then grew up to do. This child, this Son of God, who came for shepherds, Wise Men, and you. No matter who you are or what you have done. Repent, actually, of who you are and what you have done, and receive Him and what He has done. Open your mouth not to explain or excuse, but to eat and drink and feed on Him and His forgiveness. For that is what Wise Men do.

And then, just as the Wise Men ***went home a different way***, you go home different, too.

Enriched with His gifts. Forgiven. Strengthened. Enlightened. Enabled to live this new life you have been given. And rejoicing in the epiphany of the Lord for you.

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.