

JJ²

Christmas has come and gone. Returns and exchanges at stores have been made. I'm sure the stores are already gearing up for Valentine's Day. Many Christmas trees have been put to the curb or burn pile. All that hype leading up to Christmas quickly fizzles away, and Christmas is forgotten by so many. It's a danger even for us to move on too quickly from Christmas.

Today we are blessed by the wisdom of those who lived long before us and put together our church year calendar so that we keep Christmas going. You see, today (or technically yesterday) is Christmas again—the Gentile Christmas. Today we celebrate Epiphany. We've already celebrated Christmas with Joseph, Mary, Jesus in the manger and the shepherds. Today we celebrate Christmas with those from outside the land of Israel. We celebrate with the Gentile world. We celebrate in particular with some Gentile men who knew the Lord had come when they saw his star rise. Today let us celebrate the Gentile Christmas, Epiphany, by seeing how people near and far have responded to the Epiphany **STAR OF WONDER, STAR OF LIGHT.**

Matthew writes, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to

Jerusalem." Now it's easy for us to make some wrong assumptions about the Wise Men. More often than not, we get mixed up on when they came and how many there were. Look at almost any Christmas card with the manger scene and you will see three wise men along with the shepherds. Even our bulletin artwork today assumes that there were three Wise Men.

The Wise Men weren't there at the stable. Verse 11 tells us that by this time Mary, Joseph and Jesus were living in a house. We can't be exactly certain how long afterwards the Wise Men came, but looking at this account, it was at least a couple of weeks or maybe even close to two years. We are also never told how many of them there were, just that there was more than one and three gifts were brought.

When the Wise Men got to Jerusalem, they started asking around, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

It was joyous wonder that sent them on this great journey, following the star to see and worship for themselves the Light of the World. You could imagine that the Wise Men may have been a bit confused, even upset, to have come all that way,

¹ Sermon theme, general outline and some specific thoughts from *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, Volume 28, Part 1, Series B, Epiphany by Rev. Robert Bugbee. Any italicized portions are direct quotations.

² JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

enter the holy city of Jerusalem, and find that no one seems to know what they're talking about. The Greek implies that they have to keep asking.

Luther imagines their reaction this way: "Can it be that we foreigners should be the first to have news of him in the royal city? Everyone is so cold and unfriendly that no one offers to go with us and show us the child. They do not believe themselves that to them a king is born, and shall we come and find him? How desolate for the birth of a king! If a puppy were born there would be some little stir, and here a king is supposed to be born and everything is so still."³

Then, instead of seeing Jerusalem burst into jubilant joy at the news of the long-promised star and Savior, they're all put on edge! Matthew writes: "When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him." Why? How could this be? Herod was not filled with wonder at the news of this star and that his Savior was born because Herod was a paranoid spiritual fake. He was ethnically an Edomite, not a Jew. And while he went through the motions to outwardly appear as a Jew, his heart was dark with unbelief. This is most evident in his willingness to kill anyone who threatened his throne—whether the

threat was real or a figment of his imagination. If he had the capacity to kill wives and sons, there wouldn't be a problem with a little child born to a couple of peasants.

Sadly, Herod wasn't alone in being upset by the star and words of these Wise Men. "When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him." When Herod's paranoia got the best of him, the people of Jerusalem knew that blood was about to be shed. Jerusalem's wonder at the star seems only to have been whether or not they were going to be collateral damage.



What's sadder still is the reaction of the spiritual leaders of Israel. The Greek implies that they didn't have the answer on the tip of their tongues! They have to look up one of the most specific and recent prophecies about the coming Messiah!

What's worse, did you notice their reaction to this news? They're indifferent! No wonder. No awe. No desire to follow the STAR OF WONDER, STAR OF LIGHT along with the Wise Men.

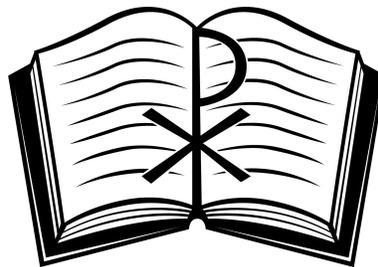
All these poor responses, yet God still carried out his plan in the fullness of time. Even though Herod would kill all those boys in and around Bethlehem, God still carried out his plan. Even

³ Martin Luther. *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, Ed. Roland H. Bainton (Kindle Locations 425-428). Kindle Edition.

without a joyous welcome from Jerusalem and the spiritual leaders of Israel, the **STAR OF WONDER, STAR OF LIGHT** still appeared and Jesus still came. Herod and Jerusalem ended up being the losers.

The star makes a point: God will get his way and accomplish his plan with or without anyone. If he has to do it without you, then you're the one left behind, standing outside looking in. Friends, the Epiphany star asks a clear question of you: Is it a star of wonder for you? Is the Light of the World to which it leads your greatest source of joy...or not?

In many ways, we're not always so different than those who lived in Jerusalem so long ago. You have incredible spiritual blessings here: weekly worship, Sunday School, Adult Bible Class, Catechism Class, just to name a few. Yet you also have a sinful nature working inside of you. A sinful nature that works along with the devil so that you would be like the people of Jerusalem who didn't care when the Wise Men showed up with exciting news that the Savior was born. You too can reach the sad point where you shrug off the urgency of drawing near to Christ, because, after all, "I already know all this stuff!" In this way the evil one can take a great spiritual heritage and turn it into poison, because you may say a shallow "Yes,



yes!" to the Christmas message without embracing it with gladness and wonder.

A new year has begun. It's a reminder *that time is ticking away. You're coming that much closer to the end of all things, or to the end of your personal life, whichever comes first.* With a new year you've probably made some plans and personal goals. You can make all kinds of plans with regards to the things of this world, but what about your life as a child of God? Friends, consider the Wise Men and imitate them.

"After listening to the king, they went on their way. Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. After

they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

The Wise Men followed that **STAR OF WONDER, STAR OF LIGHT** for hundreds and hundreds of miles, and when they reached their destination, they were bubbling over with joy. Friends, you don't have to do anything like that. In a way, you could say *we have Bethlehem right here in our church because the saving news of Jesus is proclaimed.* Whenever we

celebrate the Lord's Supper, there we have Christ with us in a miraculous way together with bread and wine! There he gives you himself and the forgiveness of all your sins!

Friends, be filled with wonder that God became man so that God could be with us! Rejoice in that star that so long ago led some Gentile men to travel long distances to see and worship their Savior. Rejoice that, even though you do not see your Savior with your own eyes right now, the light of the gospel has shined brightly into your hearts that you would know this holy Child is your Savior! Continue to follow the light of the Gospel and never grow tired of it's beauty or how much more there is yet for you to learn. The Christmas tree may soon be going to the curb, but keep Christmas in your heart every day of the year. This is how you continue to follow that **STAR OF WONDER, STAR OF LIGHT**. Amen.

SDG⁴

⁴ SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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