

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12
Feast of the Epiphany, January 3 (transferred), 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you...

As we come to the close of our annual 12-day Christmas Feast, we observe the Epiphany of our Lord – the revealing of Jesus Christ to the world! In the eastern half of the Christian world, what we call “The Feast of the Epiphany” is celebrated as the birthday of Jesus Christ. Yes, indeed, in places like Greece, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Russia – the places where Eastern Orthodox Christians follow the Julian calendar – January 7th is the Feast of Christmas, and the 6th is Christmas Eve. And up through the 4th century, the whole Christian church celebrated the nativity of our Lord on January 6th – so Merry Christmas!

But then, as I reminded you in the sermon on Christmas morning, the birthday of Jesus came to be celebrated in the West on December 25th, by order of the Roman emperor Aurelian in the third century. This was to supercede the celebration day of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun – a diety whom he worshiped. In 325 A.D. Emperor Constantine moved the celebration of Jesus birth throughout the Roman Empire to December 25th – as he declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire – and so January 6th became relegated to the visit of the Magi from the East – after Christ was born. However, the Eastern Orthodox Church has continued to observe January 6th as Christmas Eve - the time of Jesus’ birth – and Jesus’ baptism by John - his “Epiphany” – a day which also includes the wise men’s visit, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest in prayer, and myrrh for anointing the king’s body in burial. Strange gifts for a child, but infused with deep, symbolic meaning.

So the word “epiphany” means “manifestation” – to make something important known – like an appearance by the gods, in the ancient world. The announcement of the new emperor of Rome was an “epiphany” – the name of the king was revealed, as a god – and proclaimed as “good news of great joy” to the people. That’s how the word was originally used. But in their stories of Jesus, Matthew proclaimed the birth of Jesus of Nazareth as gospel “good news”. He was not an emperor, or a recognized king in Israel, or even part of a royal or priestly family. Jesus was a commoner – although Matthew and Luke claimed that Jesus was descended from King David’s royal line, many generations before). And the good news was not merely of a royal birth, but the good news according to Matthew was of the kingdom of heaven – a new reality that God was bringing to earth through Jesus.

So the gospels proclaim that Jesus was born to be a new kind of king, to be the Messiah, the one sent by God to not only save the Jewish people, but all people and all nations. The whole world would be set free from the domination of earthly power – and replace oppression with mercy and grace, by the saving power of God! In those days Roman emperors and earthly kings were often proclaimed as “bringers of peace” because they did it by force – with the power of military might. (The Roman peace was actually the absence of open rebellion or opposition, enforced by the sword – with Roman legions and execution by the cross.) But the peace of God was a totally differently kind of peace – peace between God and God’s people through forgiveness and compassion, with relationships built upon trust, faithfulness and mercy. This is a totally different peace than the peace of Rome. For conquering a nation and people and forcing them into submission by force is NOT peace (I wish that we as a nation could learn this today). Changing hearts, by inviting people to see themselves as one people, and their former enemies as neighbors and friends – even brothers and sisters – now THAT is what brings true peace! This is truly good news for a violent world.

Now, the “legitimate” king of the world at the time when Jesus was born was Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of Rome – and locally, in Judea, it was King Herod. Augustus was all-powerful, but Herod’s power was limited. So Herod was paranoid, worrying about threats to his rule, and any possible future threat to the rule of his descendants. He had been placed on his throne by vote of the Roman Senate 40 years before, with the understanding that he would keep the “Roman peace” in Palestine. He was not an Israelite himself, but was from Idumea, a region south of Judea - though he had Roman connections, which had given him his power. He had one of his own wives and son murdered in order to hold on to power. This was the type of ruler people were accustomed to in those days. On the other hand, how different is it today, when there are people in politics who will do almost anything to get elected or achieve power – including bribery, dirty tricks, letting down their constituents and selling out their ideals. And I daresay that there are some high-powered politicians who have had their opponents killed, ruined or discredited – in order to get what they want. Or they start wars, invade other countries, and many people die to satisfy their lust for power. Think of that when politicians suggest dropping bombs or sending in troops when there conflict occurs across the globe, especially during a presidential campaign.

So on the first Epiphany of our Lord Jesus, *magi* (translated “wise men” in English) came from the East searching for this child who had been born king of the Jews. They were learned scholars – likely from Persia, the land of another ancient empire, ruled long before by Darius the Great. *Magi* were Persian priests, followers of Zoroastrianism – a religion that studied astrology, alchemy and magic. Alchemy was an ancient forerunner of chemistry, which sought by magic to

transform common elements into precious metals, like gold. They were scholars, astrologers, and magicians – studying the constellations seeking deeper meaning behind human events, or a hint to the future. So it isn't surprising that the magi who came to visit Jesus had studied the stars to find the location of a great king's birth, or that gold was one of their gifts, along with frankincense and myrrh.

Still, the three magi had to consult with the king of Judah for help in order to find this newborn king. So three foreigners came to the court of this paranoid, ruthless King Herod in Jerusalem – and the king needed the help of the chief priests and scribes of the Temple (who hated him, because Herod, too, was an outsider – who had been placed on the throne by Romans, and replaced some Temple priests with priests from Babylonia and Egypt). So into the midst of all this royal intrigue and priestly distrust, wandered these three foreign astrologer magicians, looking for the “new king of the Jews”! What could go wrong?

So Herod's priestly adversaries gave the hints from scripture which sent the magi on their way, and the star guided them to Bethlehem – where they joyfully honored the child with their royal gifts. They were supposed to return to Herod to tell them the child's location, but you know the story – they were warned in a dream NOT to go back to Herod, so they went home by another road. So concludes the happy story from today's gospel.

The portion we did not read today is found in the next six verses. An angel also warned Joseph in a dream to flee quickly from King Herod's wrath - to Egypt, which he did, with Mary and the baby Jesus. They remained refugees in Egypt until Herod died. When the king learned that he had been deceived, he sent his soldiers to kill all the baby children two years old or younger, who lived in or near Bethlehem – Matthew says – to fulfill the words of the prophet Jeremiah, *“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”*

The consequences of the good news of Jesus' birth, from the beginning, were pain and suffering of the innocent, because of the cruel paranoia of an earthly king. Such a contrast to the righteous king called upon in the psalm of the day, *“that he may rule your people righteously and the poor with justice...let him defend the needy among the people, rescue the poor, and crush the oppressor..He has compassion on the lowly and poor, and preserves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their lives, and precious is their blood in his sight.”* How different this Herod was, from the king of the royal psalms! And how different are so many of our human leaders, past and present, both appointed by others or chosen by us, some whom we elect ourselves!

So why do we observe this Feast of the Epiphany anyway, and tell this ancient story once again, today? We see that the good news of the Messiah's birth was not only for shepherds in Bethlehem, or the people of Judea – it was for the

people of all nations – symbolized by those three magi who came from far away, who knew nothing of the prophecies of scripture, or the faith of the Jewish people. It is to remember that the one born to be savior came into a world just as cruel and ruthless as today's, in the midst of political intrigue and power struggles which continue today to inflict suffering on innocent people – especially children. We are reminded that when the good news of God is proclaimed, which is God's call for justice, and compassion for the poor and the suffering, there is a push back from those in power, which brings consequences. So when we witness it, we know that this is nothing new – that it has happened from the beginning.

But the scripture encourages us with the continued call for God's justice, which comes like a light shining in the darkness of this world. There is joy, symbolized by the birth of this child Jesus, who gives us the certain hope of God's ultimate victory over those forces of darkness, which come in the form of ignorance, violence and hate. The victory comes through faith in the wisdom of God, in the peace and love that God brings to all of us.

This light continues to shine through the ages – even when we all seem to be walking in darkness, the light is still there. We see the light shine in Jesus – in his teaching, in his example of faith, in his power to heal and cast out demons, and in the sacrifice of his own life in order to give life to the world – to you and to me. So today we see and hear God's Word in Jesus Christ revealed in the words of the gospel – the “good news” proclaimed – and in the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. In the bread and wine of the eucharist we can taste and see the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you and me – the ultimate revealing of Jesus' presence in the world, a great mystery, a foretaste of the feast to come. So the epiphany of God's Son takes place every day through faith, and today we see it, hear it, feel it and taste it in this meal, to which all are invited, at our Lord's Table. Then we can go forth out into the world ourselves, with this good news that we have received, as witnesses to the light that shines so brightly through the darkness!

Thanks be to God. Amen.