

Matthew 2.1-12

The Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord (transf.)

7 January 2018

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

To have the Gospel without understanding it is to have no Gospel at all. And to have the Scriptures without recognizing Christ and His Gospel is nothing more than to have a closed book, as useless to you as a Danielle Steele novel.

That's what today's lesson from Matthew teaches. It's a terror to every Herod; but rich grace and blessing to everyone who, like the magi, simply will not stop until they find Christ, and find Him where He promises to be—in His Word.

The words on which the sermon for today is based is the Gospel lesson, and especially these words: "Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people [Herod] inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."'"

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

Much ado is made about the star that magi saw in the East. Truth to tell, there's not much to say about it except what we have here in Matthew chapter 2. There was a star. It was a miracle. For whatever reason, they saw it and recognized that it was the star of a new-born king of Israel. And so they came. To Jerusalem. The capital city.

Naturally, right? Because where else would the king be born than in the king's house? Where else would a king be found than in the capital city?

That's a lot like today. People search for the Christ and search for their salvation. And they look in all the obvious places. He's in the glory of nature, they say, like the R.A.F. captain C.S. Lewis writes about who "experienced God" in the vastness and expanse and emptiness and brilliant color of the North African desert. It's a spiritual high. Or so it appears. And they move from high to high seeking Christ.... But finding only Herod. A cruel king who wants nothing to do with the Savior of the world and is hell-bent on destroying Him and His Gospel. Who with one hand gives Christ, and with the other wants to take Him away.

But there Christ is not to be found. That's obvious from what Matthew writes, isn't it? When the magi showed up in Jerusalem, they found no king of Israel, only a pretender king, Herod. Who wasn't even a Jew, but an Idumean. A fake. A usurper. A puppet king set up not to shepherd God's holy people, but to rob and destroy them. Christ was not to be found there.

But in His great goodness and mercy the Lord God of heaven and earth—the same Lord God who by the star had shown His incarnation in the womb of the blessed Virgin—that same Lord God gave them a gift brighter and clearer than the star. Brighter and clearer, for it gave not a general direction, but an exact

location, Bethlehem in the land of Judah. More firm and certain than the star that for a time disappeared. More firm and certain for it was God's own Word. And the Word of the Lord endures forever. More trustworthy than the lying words of Herod—for this Word of God testified concerning His Son: "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah; for from you shall come forth a prince who shall shepherd My people Israel."

That's what the Lord God gave them when they visited Jerusalem. His Word. And through His Word His Christ. And through His Word and Christ His Gospel.

And look what it that Gospel and Word of Christ did: it created faith. Faith, the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11.1). Gone from vision now is the star. Not only that, but the magi must also banish from their mind all that Jerusalem seemed to be.

- Herod's palace and majesty—faith must put it out of mind.
- The intellectual brilliance of the scribes and scholars. Their knowledge of Israel's holy books was so great that it was through nothing but an informal conversation that Herod ascertained where Christ had been born. But faith must put even that brilliance of intellect out of mind and think nothing of it.
- The fake, but still splendid, temple of Herod, built to house the glory of God that had departed from Israel—faith must make nothing even of this would-be house of God.

All of it had to put out of mind and out of sight.

Because now the magi have God's Word. And having God's Word, they have Christ. And having Christ, they have the redemption that is in Him. And so they press on. To Bethlehem. To a nowhere outpost. As if they had learned that you won't find a scholar in Manhattan here K-State is, but in Latimer, Kansas. Not a paved road to be found. And population 20.

Fellow-redeemed: this is what faith does. It clings firmly to nothing but the Word. And it won't rest until it finds Christ. It forges on against the mad raging of the Herods of this world, who want nothing more than to thwart God, His Word, and His Christ. And it won't be warned off the track by the powerful—if it only it can have Christ and His redemption.

And so we should take the example of the magi earnestly and take it to heart.

Because just as sure as the devil planted a Herod at the time of Christ, so sure has he planted them throughout history—enemies of the faith. Enemies of God and His Christ. And they're alive and well today. Clawing, wheedling, deceiving, if only they can tear some away from Christ or keep them from Him. They do it to you. They do it to your children and grandchildren. And, sad to say, oftentimes when they do it to your children and grandchildren, they're using them as a back door to get to you. "Little Joey has fallen away from the faith, so why not join him?"

But just look at the tenacity of faith in the face of all of this. Undaunted the magi forge forward. Because faith seeks not what it already has, but what it lacks: Christ and His redemption. And it won't be satisfied until it has them.

That's why faith draws you here every Sunday. Because here you can find everything you don't have. You have the devil around your neck along with your sins and sure death. But here you have Christ, His righteousness, everlasting life in His name. Because here, just as He was found in Bethlehem, here He is found clothed in His Word and Sacrament. This is the great grace and blessing of the Gospel for today:

Christ may be found. He may be found in His Word and Sacrament. And there and there alone does faith find its Bethlehem and Christ.

The problem is, you can have all of that—the Scriptures with Christ and the Gospel—and still not have them at all.

Just like Herod.

For the Lord gave Herod no less than He gave the magi. In fact, maybe even more. To be sure, Herod didn't get a star. But the magi were complete strangers to Jerusalem and the temple and the Law and the Prophets. They didn't know thing one about any of it. Herod did. He had them all. Right in front of his nose. And yet he lacked everything they offered because he lacked faith.

And he lacked faith because the object of faith is Christ. Christ, who came to disrupt everything that Herod was and had. Who came to take Herod's kingdom, throne and crown from him. Who came as the New and Last Temple to replace the temple Herod had refurbished. Who came to swap His life for Herod's. Who came to save Herod from himself—from his sins and death. And Herod wanted nothing of it.

Now, it's not like the magi had anything less to lose in gaining Christ. Back in their homeland they practiced some form of the dark arts. And for it they held great positions of honor. They were the ancient equivalent of the cabinet of the President of the United States. Consulted at every turn by the most powerful man they knew. For them, too, two diverging paths were laid before them: it was either that kind of power and influence or Christ. And faith stood by Christ.

But not Herod. For Herod refused what was right in front of his nose. To Christ and His righteousness and everlasting life he preferred his own wealth and power and glory. To Christ and the certainty of everlasting salvation he preferred self-secured security in this life. To Christ and the kingdom of heaven he preferred his puppet kingdom on earth. So that having the Scriptures and with them Christ and the Gospel, he had none of them. Because he lacked faith.

And this is the terrifying thing about this history of Herod and the magi. Christ lies 5 miles away in Bethlehem with all His grace and mercy, with all His redemption and the forgiveness of sins, with all His life and everlasting life—and Herod will have nothing to do with Him or any of it. And so what is given, he refuses. What Christ wants him to have, he despises.

Fellow-redeemed: there's a little Herod inside each one of us. Sometimes we call him the Old Adam. Sometimes our own little Pharisee. Sometimes the sinful flesh. No matter what name you use it's all the same. And Christ has come into our world no less than into Herod's. He came into Herod's through the waters of Mary's womb. He came into ours through the water of our Baptism. There He gave and exchanged His life for ours; His death for the one we deserve; His righteousness for our sins.

And yet, like Herod, the Old Adam wants nothing of it. He likes his sins. He doesn't want the new life in Christ for the old sinful life. He wants to stay the course. And had he his druthers, he'd be done with Christ and His Gospel forever, just like Herod when he had all the little boys in Bethlehem killed.

You know what that's like. "Oh, I'll deal with that sin. But not now. Later."

That's nothing more than Herod getting the upper hand. But make no mistake: he has no other goal than to eradicate and destroy and expunge Christ and His Gospel. He wants nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins because he's quite satisfied, thank you very much, with the sins he has.

But here's the kicker: if he doesn't get drowned in the water of Baptism, put to death so that Christ might live, he'll get exactly what he wants. And his sins will be hung around his neck eternally. Just as it went for Herod.

That's the terrifying thing about this Gospel lesson: it teaches where Christ may be found—in His holy Word. It teaches that Christ can be had and held only by faith. But it also teaches that you can have Scripture where Christ may be found and Christ and the Gospel, and, lacking faith, not have them at all.

But it also teaches that not even Herod can destroy and expunge the Gospel and Christ. And that the Word of the Lord will stand forever. A light that shines in the darkness of unbelief and calls forth faith in those who hear it. And the swaddling clothes that hold the Christ child.

And it shows what power that Word has. It gives your faith the strength to battle through all the Herods of this world and in your own heart. It tempers your faith so that will not rest until it has what Christ wants to give: the forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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