

Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-12
Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord
6 January 2022
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.

The Gospel for tonight really lays out one simple question: what do you make of Jesus? What do you make of Jesus?

On the one hand, He's the one prophesied long ago. So long ago, in fact, that the prophecy of His star's rising in Numbers 24 made its way into the pagan lore of the magi, who recognized the star when it arose and came to worship Him.

And they came to worship Him.

Certainly, because He was the King of the Jews.

But more pointedly because He's a certain kind of King of the Jews.

He's the kind whose title gets posted over His head atop His cross. Atop the dead wood from which springs the life of the world. He's the kind of King who establishes a kingdom that doesn't crumble to dust, like Herod's was going to in just a few years, but who creates and founds and establishes an eternal kingdom. And He's the kind of King of the Jews whose kingdom is the fulfillment of the prophecy to Abraham. Whose descendants will number more than stars. Whose Offspring will be a blessing to the entire world. No genealogical tables required to figure out if you're in or out. He died for the sins of the whole world. You included. No matter your DNA sequences, your bloodlines, your genealogy. He and His kingdom are yours through faith alone.

That's the Jesus of the magi, who knew Him as He was revealed in the Scriptures ... and received Him in faith. For they knew that what Christ had to give them was better than anything they already had. And they had a lot. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. Expensive stuff.

But how much dearer the forgiveness of sins!

But there's another Jesus here. The Jesus of Herod's imagination, and of the imagination of the chief priests and the scribes.

And for the same exact reason that the magis' Jesus was a great blessing He appeared to Herod and the chief priests and scribes just as great a curse.

Because He came to take what was theirs and give them what was His.

For Herod's earthly kingdom He came to give Herod a heavenly kingdom.

For the chief priests many and daily sacrifices for the sin of Israel He came to be the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, even for them.

For the scribes' learning He came to be for them wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

And this they would not have. It was too much.

This is the great irony and tragedy of sin.

You know, when it comes right down to it, no one really likes sin. They just don't. Even sinners don't really like sin. Take an extreme example: do you think a libertine like Jeff Epstein never had pangs of conscience? And aren't all sinners aware and wary of sin catching up with you. How often do you think to yourself or say out loud, "I wish I hadn't done that"? There might be all sorts of reasons you say that. You don't want to get caught out. Or it messes with some self-conception you have. You think to yourself, "Wow, I'm not that kind of person, am I?" But the point is this: even sinners don't like sin.

But here's the problem with sinners. The bottom of sin is so deep, its roots so hidden, that it can't be excavated.

What sinners don't like of sin is what they can see of sin.

But sin is a much bigger problem than that. Because at its root sin is a misapprehension, a misjudgment of God. It's a First Commandment issue. It's an issue of who's in the driver's seat. The first impulse of sinners when faced with their sin is, "I have to do something about this." And they get busy. They bury their own sin under a pile of good. They deal with it.

Now look, I know you know there are all sorts of problems with this. One offense against God is worthy of death. And no sinner wants to pay his debt by his death. God demands perfection. But even a perfect life after one sin leaves the life marred by that one sin. The list goes on.

But none of those things are the biggest problem about being sinner. At all.

The biggest problem is and remains a First Commandment issue: The sinner simply cannot let God be God. The sinner cannot fear, love *and trust in* God above all things. If he could, he would cast himself before God. And in trust and confidence and hope and beg for mercy. But he doesn't. Instead, he strides before God holding up the good he has done, as if he had the upper hand on God Himself, as if God could be controlled and turned by it all.

The Lord sits on His throne with all holiness and righteousness, more than He needs, and by giving it away to save, and the sinner is offended.

Just like Herod. The Lord came to give an everlasting kingdom, but his was just fine, thank you very much. The Lord came to give to the chief priests an everlasting forgiveness in His blood, but the blood of goats was good for them. The Lord came with the wisdom of His cross, and the scribes—they called it foolishness.

So what does this Gospel teach? Just let God be God. That's what the magi did. And that's called faith. Faith looks to Christ in Bethlehem and says, "Aha! This is how God wishes to be God! He wishes to be Immanuel, God-with-Us. To wear *my* flesh. To take my side. To be my Brother and Helper." Faith looks to Christ on His cross and says, "This, too, is how God wishes to be God! By bearing *my* sin for *me*. By shedding the blood I must shed and rendering the death I must render. By being forsaken by the heavenly Father in this judgment that I may not be forsaken in the Last!"

So which Jesus do you see? Which Jesus will you have? There's only One—the Jesus whom the magi beheld in faith. The other? He's only a figment of Herod's fallen imagination.

So just let God be God. And may you by faith in His Son be led at last to enjoy in heaven the fullness of His presence. Amen.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

jsb

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