

The Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord
6 January, Anno Domini 2023
St. Matthew 2:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved in the Lord,

The good news of salvation is not good news to everyone. Certainly the wise men from the East found it to be good news. It was such good news to them that they embarked on a long and arduous journey so that they could fall down before the one who had been born King of the Jews and worship Him as their own true and saving King and Messiah.

Just take a moment and think what the magi's arrival in Bethlehem to receive the Christ meant. It meant that God had again accomplished something wonderful in the midst of something terrible. Nearly 600 years earlier, the Babylonians had been sent by God against Israel to punish them for their unbelief and idolatry and hardness of heart. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and that meant there was no longer a place of the Lord's presence. There was no longer a place where the lamb of atonement could be slaughtered. No more mercy seat. No more priests offering up prayers on behalf of the people. What did all that mean for God's promise of salvation?

Yet, as God's people went into a strange land and sat down by the rivers of Babylon, weeping over their sin and their removal from the Promised Land, they took with them a light into the darkness - the Holy Scriptures, the unfailing promises of God. For six centuries, God's Word had been infiltrating the devil's kingdom in Persia. The result? Wise men from the East believed what God had spoken and eagerly sought out the King of the Jews, He who was the Savior of all nations! The angels meant it when they told the shepherds that the good news that they had to share was for all the people.

Contrast the magi's joyous response of faith with the fear that settled over God's own people in Jerusalem. It's certainly no wonder that the puppet king Herod was troubled. His grip on the throne was tenuous at best. The last thing he needed was a rival. But what about the rest of Jerusalem? Why is Israel troubled? Why aren't God's people rejoicing with exceedingly great joy at the news that the long-awaited Messiah had finally come? Why don't the chief priests and the scribes knock the magi off their camels in a mad dash to get to Bethlehem? Why didn't they tell Herod what kind of King this King was - the Lord of heaven and earth who had come to redeem all people from their sin, including Herod Himself? They knew right where the Christ was to be born because God had told them - Bethlehem in Judah. They had known that since the prophet Micah uttered those words some 700 years ago! How can it be that God came to His own, but His own people

did not receive Him? Indeed, they were troubled at the news of His arrival! They were afraid!

How can it be that today, having read and studied the Holy Scriptures, so many Christians don't know basic Christian teachings like the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, or what the benefits of Baptism are or that God created all things in heaven and on earth in seven days and made man male and female? How can it be that those who have heard that on the night He was betrayed unto death for our salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the meal of His Body and Blood and yet they despise it and have no trouble going without it? How can God's children who have heard of all that God has done still worry about silly things like who's running the government, what new disease has popped up, what other people think about them, or how they are going to earn more money?

These sad states of affairs exist because the good news of salvation is not good news to everyone. It is not good news to some because they don't believe they need salvation. It is not good news to others because they don't believe the invitation to salvation is for them. It is not good news to others because they love their life and their possessions in this world more than God. The good news of salvation is good news only to those who confess their need for salvation, those whose consciences have been struck by the Law's searing accusation and despair of their own goodness.

We must confess of ourselves that though we have seen the light of Holy Scripture and heard the absolving word of Christ, we have not always rejoiced and moved heaven and earth to fall down and worship the one who was born King of the Jews to die as the Savior of all sinners - including us. We have not with all boldness and confidence called upon our heavenly Father who received us as His children in Holy Baptism. We have doubted the goodness and kindness of God our Savior who wrapped Himself in our flesh that He might wrap Himself in our death and open to us the gates of eternal life. We have been troubled by His coming because it means that our righteousness is nothing, that our status and our possessions are meaningless.

Christ is a threat to our sinful flesh and reason. To acknowledge the Christ is to acknowledge that our treasures are trash, our works are only evil, and that we are filled with darkness. He is a threat to everything the world loves and believes is good. He is a threat to the rulers of the earth who set themselves against Him in their vain attempts to gain power and glory for themselves. He is a threat to the little tyrants in our own hearts who want to be king, make the rules, and conduct our affairs according to our own selfish desires. He is a threat to all who preach a false god, who claim to speak for God but who do not speak according to the Scriptures, those who claim that they have received a new revelation beyond the Scriptures. He is a threat to the dark forces of evil in the heavenly places that seek to drag humanity into eternal death.

The baby of Bethlehem is certainly to be feared if you will not receive Him in faith. He is a source of trouble, a stone of stumbling and rock of offense, if salvation from sin and death is of no interest to you. But to all, Jew or Gentile, who hunger for God's righteousness and thirst for His forgiveness, Jesus is the source of joy beyond measure. Veiled under the flesh of Mary's now-toddler son is Yahweh come to overthrow sin and death, to cast the bright light of truth into the darkness of this blind and confused world. To all who receive Him and are not offended by Him, to all who believe the glad tidings of Holy Scripture and follow it to the Christ now veiled under Word and water, under bread and wine, He has given the right to become children of God.

To you the good news of Jesus has been made manifest. You have been blessed to hear God's own revelation concerning Himself and all that He has done to redeem you. The Savior of the nations has been revealed and He has revealed to you the righteous judgment of God - that your sin has been laid upon the Christ and His righteousness has been laid upon you. Let us join the wise men in their great joy and hasten in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ as we await the day when He will return in all power and glory to be our eternal and undimmed light.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace that passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.