



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

Today we are going to celebrate the Feast of Epiphany. It arrives on the 12th day of Christmas, or January 6th. And all along you thought that the 12 days of Christmas came before the 25th, because that is what retailers wanted you to think. Hurry up and buy, buy, buy. And because Christmas has twelve days it is OK to continue to play Christmas music. I have not put my favorite CD's away just yet. So, remember that it is OK to play Christmas music until the 6th of January. But today I did take a bit of lectionary freedom and moved it up one days. Hope there are no liturgical police lurking this morning.

Most Christians know about the importance of Easter and Christmas, right? Even those Christians that don't come to church any other time seem to make it on those holidays. And that is most unfortunate for them. They are missing the value of worshiping together, praying as a group and hearing God's Word being read, sung, and preached. Well, enough of that.

Now, a little history lesson here. Up until the third century, it was Epiphany, Pentecost, and Easter that were celebrated. That was until the time of Constantine when it became legal to be a Christian. It was then that the date December 25th was chosen to celebrate Jesus' birth. And we all know today that Christmas is the biggest holiday of the church year. Actually, the biggest holiday of the year. But until then it was Epiphany that was the "big deal". So why do you suppose that Epiphany was so important to the early church? It was the revealing of God as a human. Epiphany is defined as an appearance or manifestation, particularly of a divine being or an illuminating discovery, especially one that comes unexpectedly, says dictionary.com. And so, one can understand it's importance the Christianity. So, both Epiphany as well as Christmas are very important to us. Well, I would like to talk more about the importance of Epiphany. So here goes.

On Epiphany we recall the story of the Three Kings. As I was preparing this message, I had a hard time deciding what to talk about. Many topics in this wonderful story like; the light that shines forth from Christ, the interesting gifts the Kings brought, how it took them so long to arrive, the shining star that stopped in place, the super mean King Herod or was this event really important? Only Matthew put the story in His Gospel. All good things to think about.

Most of you know this about me, I love Matthew's Gospel. By far and away it is my favorite. Favorite, even though there are no shepherds, no stable, and no manger. Right after Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, there is however this great story we are looking at today, about the Magi coming to see the newborn babe. They truly have an epiphany during their visit. For them it was truly an illuminating discovery. The Magi had found the King of Kings.

Matthew's sublime story of the adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence. That was a quote I read this week that got me thinking. The difference is one of attitude. The poet and artist approach scripture with wonder and affection. In other words, with the heart. The scholars approach Scripture systematically and analytically, with the head. Both have their place, but this story shows how Christ enriches those who allow Him to enter their hearts. The Magi came with joy in their hearts to see the Christ child. And God allowed them to see wondrous things.

We now can look at the birth of Jesus in two different ways. Jesus as He was seen as by the Magi with their Epiphany glasses on, so to speak. Or through the eyes of Herod, The eyes of the Magi, who have faith, or the other way is through the eyes of Herod, that portrays the epitome of fear.

First, of all we have to concede that today's Gospel story is familiar to most of us. It constitutes a bridge between Christmas and the illuminated season of Epiphany. Figures of wise men and even camels are stock figures in most nativity scenes. At my home congregation, St Olaf in Rubicon, always left the wise men in the back of the sanctuary and whoever was telling the children's message on Epiphany, took the children back there to get the wise men and bring them forward. The wise men traveled from the computer desk in the back of the sanctuary to the crèche on the altar. And they brought the well-known gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And just a note here that there are no names given in Scripture to these men. In fact, we do not even really hear that there are three of them. Storytellers have named them Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar and assume there were three because they brought the Christ child three gifts. Could have been many more men in their caravan.

Well, today we also believe that it was quite a long time after the birth of Jesus, perhaps as much as two years, that the wise men or Magi arrived in Jerusalem from lands to the east, distant lands, pagan countries. They came in peace, yet they have a question. They have seen an extraordinary star in the sky, a star that remains stationary, in one place. And since they were most likely astronomers, they take this phenomenon as the sign of a royal birth. Even though they most likely, were Gentiles, believed that it was a sign, possibly a sign of the coming of the Messiah,

And so, these Magi come looking for the new prince following the star. Where would a prince most likely be found? In the home of the King and Herod the Great was his name. Yet, this is not the case. King Herod resides in Jerusalem, where he was the great builder of the Temple, but he mostly remembered for his willingness to slay several of his own sons and his wife, in the belief that they threatened his throne.

So, Herod interacts with these strangers, these seeking Magi. Herod is not feeling so great now. The King was fearful that the prince they were looking, the prince born under the star was a threat or would become one. Herod being quite paranoid about keeping his power and thrown was driven by this fear to deceive and to kill. Trembling for his throne, his identity, his very life, Herod, as we know came to order babies under two years old, taken from their mothers' arms and slaughtered

with the sword. These little ones were called the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem and were done away with so that Herod was sure to have no new prince someday be a rival.

It is fear that makes a fool and a villain of Herod. And what an opportunity he misses! The God of all mercy arranges for his Son to be born for us, in Herod's territory and what happens? Herod is so overtaken by fear; he cannot see the forest for the trees. God's Son comes to Herod as he comes to us all, born an innocent and defenseless child, and Herod the Great is taken captive by fear. Fear of losing their status is a mistake often made by powerful people, even today.

Herod is ignorant of the Scriptures and so must ask the chief priests and scribes where the Scriptures say Israel's true ruler is to come from. Bethlehem, they tell him. Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem, expecting that they will surely report back to him and make his murder of the newborn king an easy crime to commit.

Herod points the wise men to Bethlehem of Judea. But it is the wondrous star that actually leads them there, the star that brought them far from their homeland. This extraordinary star stops in the sky right above a most ordinary house. It stops not above a temple or a palace, but above an average, plain old dwelling.

The wise men think nothing of this ordinary house. Certainly, they are not fearful. Scripture tells us that they were actually overwhelmed with joy. Overwhelmed with joy, after a weary trip from lands far away in the east, their journey ends with a joyous light of more than human origin. They see Mary and they recognize that something special, someone special is in her arms. The travelers are overwhelmed to see heaven's joy in the face of this little child. These wise men were not pagans after all, but rather have chosen faith, faith in a God mysterious and awesome. And they kneel down and paid Jesus homage. They present Him with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. WOW!

And you all know the joke, if the wise men had been women, they would have arrived on time, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, etc. But these men brought unusual yet appropriate gifts for this baby. Gold is a gift fit for a king. Frankincense is used in temple worship, a true gift for a high priest. And Myrrh is an anointing oil used to prepare bodies for burial. Those gifts tell the story of who this baby would grow up to be. The King of the Jews, in fact king of all creation. He would be the High Priest of God and He would need the myrrh for the women to anoint his body as it laid in the tomb. So really the wise men, were just that, they were wise. They knew who this baby was. They had faith that He was the long-awaited Messiah. And they took the advice from God in their dream to go home by another route, so they could tell everyone what they had seen and avoid the fear stricken, paranoid, and wicked King Herod.

Herod faced a choice. He chose fear. Fear that freezes him and prevents him from welcoming the true king. He resorts to deception and murder to shore himself up instead. Fear does not allow Herod to see the joy in this newborn King.

And folks, I think that even today we face the same choice on occasion. Not in the exact way it confronted Herod, but real enough, certainly as we live our ordinary lives. We can choose fear and become a threat to others as well as ourselves. Or we can choose faith. We can trust in God and welcome a joy that will become contagious.

This choice is in front of us today in our own lives. Will we fear God or have faith that He is the Messiah sent to us as savior and redeemer, who gives us forgiveness of our sins, abundant life, and eternal life from the cross. So. . . . Fear or faith. Herod or the wise ones? Destruction or joy?

What will you choose? And the good news here is that each day, as Luther reminds us, we are a new creation, so even if you slip up and choose fear once, you can always turn around and choose faith the next day. And when we choose faith, we take one small step toward making this choice not an exception, but a habit in our lives. By choosing faith we begin a path to be the people of faith God created us to be and from there we can communicate the joy of Jesus to others.

So, I hope that you will be willing to take another road home, like the wise men. Avoid Herod, avoid fear and allow yourself to travel the better road. God will appear in your life in so many wonderful ways beginning on Mary's lap. Choose faith, so grace and joy will be given to you this day and forever! AMEN