

Sermon Epiphany 2019

January 6, 2019

Matt 2:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—God in the Flesh. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. As I read those words repeatedly this week something came to mind in relation to the feast of Epiphany that we're celebrating today. In fact, it connected closely to something in our Wednesday morning Bible Class from the book of Acts. As Paul is speaking in Acts 26, he is confessing his faith before King Herod Agrippa, great grandson of Herod the great in this lesson today, and as he confesses that faith, he makes the point that all of the things that happened with Jesus did not happen in secret. He says, **"For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner."** None of these things in the life of Jesus were done in a corner, they weren't done in secret. They were done right in the open where God's people could see them and confess them openly to the people around them.

Now to be fair, it's not as though there aren't some things with this that happened in secret. For example, this word for secret was just used in Chapter 1 to describe how Joseph was going to divorce Mary in secret after he found out she was pregnant. But what's the cause for that secret? Is it lies and selfishness like Herod? No, it's love and the protection of Mary's reputation. Joseph could have called for Mary to be stoned. He could have dragged her name through the mud. He could have made sure everyone knew just how unfaithful it appeared she had been. But no. Joseph didn't want the justice he could have had. Instead, he wanted the mercy his God had shown him. So yes, there are things that happen in the secret. But these things of Jesus are not in secret.

Look at what happens. First, think about the birth. What happened there? The angel came not only to Mary, but to Joseph too. Then there was Elizabeth, who also being with child, knew who Mary's child was. Along with Simeon, and Hannah in the temple when Jesus was presented there. Simeon who proved his knowledge speaking the words of the Nunc Dimittis that we sing, and Hannah giving thanks to God for His redemption. No this was not something done in a corner.

But here was Herod, and he as trying to call these Magi to him in secret. He was trying to talk to them in a corner. Why? Because of his evil intentions. He doesn't want the people to know about this king. One of the comments I read about this made the point that Herod was a wicked king – we see that when we hear that **“he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”** There would have been a fear of his wrath at a king who opposed him. You see, Herod was so wicked he even killed on of his own children when he feared that this child was going to be a threat to his rule. And of course we see just this meeting where Herod ascertained when the star appeared. We see that he secretly tells these wise men that he oh so piously wants to worship the child, just like them. And this was done in a corner.

So what do we see in this? We see something that Luther would often emphasize. That's that we look not for these things that happen in secret, but that what's out in the open. What I mean is this: As we look at the story of the Magi, what does it show us? It shows us that our Heavenly Father is revealing Jesus to be God in the flesh. He's openly showing this baby who was laid in the manger to be His only begotten Son. Just like He showed this with Mary and Joseph, with Elizabeth, the Shepherds, and with Hannah and Simeon. Here He's doing the same thing. How? He's bringing these men of note, men likely well respected in their own country, and what are they doing? Worshipping this child. Bowing down before an infant and showing that this Little One is the One who left heaven to enter into this world as her Savior. They are proving that this child is the Word made flesh through whom the whole universe was created, the I AM in the body of a man. God is manifesting this through them—which by the way, this is why we celebrate this in Epiphany. An epiphany is a revelation, an open manifestation of something, and that's what these Magi are showing. They're showing this open manifestation that Jesus is God.

In fact, even their gifts show this. As they bring gold, they show that this is the King of Kings, as they bring myrrh, they point to the death of this One who will die for their sins, and for the sins of the whole world. And as they bring incense they show that this is the Priest who brings the sacrifice of His own body into the heavenly temple. You know in the Old Testament you had the daily sacrifices by the priests, they would have the offerings of the animals daily on the altar, but in the holy place, in the tent of meeting, they would have incense offerings. Think about the Psalm, “Let my prayer rise before you as incense and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” There was this incense showing what Jesus would be doing as priest before our Heavenly Father eternally, praying for us. And think about the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, where the priest would sacrifice the lamb, bring that blood into

the Holy of Holies, bring that blood to the Ark of the Covenant. But what was the Holy of Holies filled with? Smoke from the Altar of Incense. So even there in this youthful estate, God is showing who this child is. He is the child who will be the perfect High Priest bringing the sacrifice of His own perfect body and life for our sins, praying for us eternally in the Heavenly Sanctuary before God the Father.

And think about the comfort here. Listen to what Luther says about this, about Jesus as this priest as we see with this gift: *“That is truly the highest and most courageous trust, that a man can confront his sin, his evil conscience, and God’s terrible wrath and judgment with this priest and say and confess with a firm faith: Tu es sacerdos in eternum, “You are a priest forever” [Ps. 110:4]. But if you are a priest, then you are an advocate for the sins of all who confess you to be such a priest. As little then, as God’s judgment, wrath, sin, and an evil conscience can condemn or terrify you, so little do they condemn or terrify me for whom you are such a priest. Behold, the true sacrifice of frankincense is undismayed in the face of every sin and the wrath of God, through Christ in faith.”*

Do you hear the comfort there? There is this Christ, this child in the manger, God in the flesh, not in secret, but in the open, advocating for you. Sacrificing Himself for you. Objectively, openly for you. That means that when your sin is before you, you have comfort. That means when the Law, the very commands of God accuse you and show you just how lowly you are, when you are crushed by all of the circumstances around you, you have the promise, the open and objective promise that God is not against you, God has not left you, God loves you and loves you with an eternal, unchangeable love. He loves you with a love found in His heart, in His very essence since the foundation of the world. Christians, what a beautiful comfort this is.

And as I say that, I want to make a point about this objectivity, this outside-ness of us. You know it’s so often a temptation in our day to deal with God according to the feelings that we have in relation to Him. Because we know the Christ comes and dwells in our hearts, with our cultural equation of the heart with emotion, it’s easy for us to seek to hear God in those emotions, or to try to listen to what He’s saying in those feelings. This means it’s easy to think that when we’re happy God is happy with us, or when we’re sad or upset, God is angry with us. But as we see this open revelation, this open Epiphany of who Jesus is as God in the flesh, God with us, we see how we should look to God, how we should deal with God. We can even say we should see there how God wants to deal with us. That He doesn’t want to come and speak to us in the secret of our heart. He doesn’t want to come and show Himself to us in the hiddenness of our feelings. No instead, He wants to come to us, wants us to

find Him in His objective promise. To look at that objective promise found in that child the Magi came to worship. To look at the cross, to look at the blood shed for us there, out of His love. He wants us to look at this Jesus resurrected. And if you still fear that's not for you—sure it's for the whole world, but if you doubt that it's for you, look at what He has done for you: Baptized you, absolved you, fed you with His body and blood.

You see this is why I am always pointing these things out. When the circumstances of life look as though our God has turned against you, you can know that He is still for you. He still loves you, you haven't sinned so greatly that He has run from you. No, instead, He has forgiven you, and wants you to know that even these things come from His love. It's not something where you have to search the unknowable depths of His mind and figure out something secret to do. No just live according to His commandments, and know that where you have fallen short He loves you. And when these things happen, that they are ultimately for your good. Just like your earthly father would discipline you, so also He disciplines you to a greater trust, a greater faith in Him. A faith which clings to those things which He promises even over against the things we see around us.

If I might make this concrete in the goings on in my own life. Since my dad was diagnosed with Kidney Cancer in October, I have watched him become increasingly uncomfortable. Of course, I have seen this before in those under my pastoral care, but it's always different when it's your own parent. But as he is struggling under this pain, this discomfort, it is easy for the temptation to come, and to assume that this is for a certain sin, or especial sinfulness. It's easy to think there is a particular anger from God. Thankfully, he has not said that he fears God has abandoned Him, as people often do in that time, but there are all kinds of questions. And as we look at the Word, I can know God hasn't abandoned Him, that God has baptized Him, Jesus has fed Him with His own body and blood. I can know that he hears that promise of his eternal life in Christ and trusts. And that is comfort. Comfort over and against circumstances.

And Christians, as we look at these Magi, that's what we see. We see, yes Herod trying to work in secret. But we see God openly manifesting Himself in Christ by those Magi. And as we see that, we see the comfort of this God in the flesh, for us. The God who shows Himself to be infinite love, in this child. What blessed comfort that is for us. Look then always to that comfort. Fix your eyes on that comfort, your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. Look to Him, His promise to you in baptism, His food for your forgiveness, and His life and love for you eternally. Amen.