

January 5, 2025

Pastor Prieue

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

**“ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’”**

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The True Light that Gives Light to the World!

Here we are at the end of the 12 days of Christmas as they’re often called, from Christmas Day to the Festival of Epiphany on January 6th. I’m sure by now you’ve got your presents opened already, played with, exchanged for the right size, and maybe some are relegated to the shelf where you’ll forget about them. But let me ask you this, did you get any gifts from someone you would consider a total stranger? Maybe not! So often our gift giving is really more an even exchange. I buy something for you, you buy something for me. We exchange. But a gift from a stranger is a little more rare! We got one gift from a total stranger this Christmas, from former Wisconsin Badger and NFL player TJ Watt, who gave a \$20 meal card to all the families who were at Children’s hospital over Christmas break. Yeah, you heard right. Josie is back in the hospital this week with pneumonia—she’s managing, hopefully will be out soon. As nice of a gift from TJ Watt as that was—20 dollars to feed everybody in the hospital adds up—it still pales in comparison to what happened in our sermon text.

Imagine this—what if today, you were home sitting on the couch and a bunch of total strangers rang your doorbell out of the blue, said they’d journeyed long and far to find you in particular, and brought you some gifts that were worth some real cha-ching—like thousands or tens of thousands of dollars. That’s really what started this whole tradition of gift-giving that we have—when the Magi from the East came and found the child, Jesus, worshipped him and gave

him gifts, expensive, one-sided gifts. What would cause someone to do something like that? It would have to be someone pretty special or some pretty lifechanging knowledge that would cause them to pick up, make a long journey into the unknown, and bring their expensive treasures to give to a child they didn't know.

But you know, they did know who the child was. They'd had an Epiphany, in the fullest sense of the word. God had enlightened them by a light, not just any light, the true light, and not just a metaphorical light, they had actually seen the light of a star, a star that they somehow knew to be watching for, a star that was revealing an epic event, the light of the world coming into the world. Today as we examine this story of *the true light giving light to the world*, we want to look specifically at the responses of those who were exposed to the light and take to heart their actions and reactions.

First, we'll look at the response of the Magi, which was kind of twofold. The first part was their journey. The Magi are kind of an enigma to us because we are told so little about them. The text says they were Magi from the East. It's a little hard to nail down exactly what the word Magi means at this particular point in time. Sometimes we call them the "Wiseman." Were they involved with some sort of magic arts? At minimum, they were astronomers who studied the sky as a field of science and probably also astrologers who superstitiously interpreted the signs of the sky as different omens, kind of like a horoscope on the internet or in the newspaper. It was usually the kind of thing the Old Testament forbid, but on this occasion, God decided to come to them in the darkness and speak their language, giving them the sign of the light of a new star.

We don't know exactly where they were from because the "East" is a pretty general location. It's likely that they were Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, outside of the covenants and foreigners to the promises, maybe from Babylon where they had some contact with descendants of Jews like Daniel or the three men in the fiery furnace who had been exiled there centuries before. Somehow or other they came to know that the appearing of the star was the fulfillment of a prophecy from the Bible. That prophecy is recorded in Numbers 24, "**A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. A ruler will come out of Jacob**" (24:17,29).

Somewhere along the way, they had come into contact with some promise or prophecy of the word and that word did not return to the Lord empty. It enlightened the darkness of their hearts with a small bit of knowledge-about the Child who was born king of the Jews, and that knowledge of the star caused action in their lives. They packed up and hit the road on the journey of a lifetime, probably travelling with an entourage a little bigger than three, all the way to Jerusalem.

Little did they know how much Biblical prophecy they themselves would be fulfilling. The prophet Isaiah foresaw in chapter 60:3, "**Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn...bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.**" The Magi saw the light of the star and it drew them to *the true light that gives light to the world*, a light even for revelation to the Gentiles.

They show up in Jerusalem, the land of the Jews, probably expecting to find some people there who know more than they know, and have realized their Messiah has been born, and guess what! The Jewish leaders seem clueless. They're sitting there in darkness with their head buried

in the sand. The Magi tell King Herod about the star and that sure causes a stir. **“When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”** Did you hear that? Not just Herod, who was actually an Edomite and a power hungry maniac that had already murdered most of his own family to eliminate any threats to his power. That’s basically a given that he would be disturbed, but all of Jerusalem with them, at the news of their long promised Messiah being born?! What on earth?

They had all the knowledge about this in the world—the covenants and promises. They had all the access. They were the chosen people. They knew by memory where the prophet said the Messiah was to be born, **“You Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Micah 5:2)** They knew with their brains, but their knowledge didn’t connect with their hearts in the response of faith. Instead, it spurred on fear; it was a disturbance to them. Somehow the good news of the Messiah had become bad news, an inconvenience. The Magi went on ahead to find the child, and the chief priests and teachers stayed put. No need to find the child—they were apparently no longer in need of a Savior and they had more important things to worry about like their positions and status to maintain. John was right when he said. **“[The true light] came to that which was his own and his own did not receive him.” (John 1:11).**

It's sad to see it happen, but we must take this story to heart so that it doesn't happen to us and our loved ones and children, especially when years of statistics have shown that about two thirds of young Christians who attend church during high school stop attending during college. It's not just young people. Since Covid 19th, there's been about a 15% drop in attendance among churches in America, and even in people who used to attend every week that are now trailing off from that. Apathy and indifference are just as good of tools in the devil's toolbelt as Herod's outright hatred of God's Son.

Even though we are Gentiles by birth, we have to realize we are in kind of a similar spot to the Jews. God has shown us the light of his word. Many of us have been taught the word from little on. We've had all the access in the world to the truths and promises and teachings. We've got the knowledge, and with it comes the increased danger that what happened to them could happen to us. All that knowledge and access amounts to nothing if it doesn't take root in hearts of faith. Listen to the way the writer to the Hebrews talks about the response that can happen, **“For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed” (Hebrews 4:2).**

The light of the world shines into our world and one of two things happens. It enlightens hearts with knowledge and calls forth life and lives of faith or people reject the light and hate it. And when that happens, **“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved the darkness instead of the light because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19).**

We must take to heart the wake-up call in this story, and then we must also go ahead with those Magi to see to the end of the story—the second part of their response. The star that they had seen in the East now went ahead of them in a miraculous way, showing them to the exact place in Bethlehem where Jesus was. And when they saw the star leading their way to the child, the text says, *they rejoiced a great joy!* They were going to get to see the child they had

come to believe was the Messiah, the king of Israel , promised of old. They found Jesus and his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him. Can you picture that? A group of prominent, well-to-do people, if not even kings of some sort, bowing down to worship a little child. Faith in the promise told them that this was the light of the world!

Last of all, they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were costly gifts for sure, and these gifts would provide for Mary and Joseph and Jesus during their flight to Egypt while avoiding Herod's slaughter of all the innocent babies. The Wiseman gave them freely, knowing they had received something far greater. They had received the blessing that God had promised Abraham 2,000 years before would come to all peoples of the earth. **“All peoples on earth will be blessed through your seed.”** (Genesis 12:3). The Magi had just been blessed to see and worship the Savior, the True Light of the World, and they came out much the richer, even with their treasure chests a little emptier.

Dear friends, this is the same blessing that is still coming to you and me this very day through Jesus who is the gift of God for all people, who brought salvation first for the Jew but also for the Gentile. This is the blessing we receive as those who were once far away but have now been brought near by the blood of Christ. We've been brought into the family and the covenants of God by our baptisms. It's the unravelling of one of God's great mysteries, revealed for us to see clearly in his good time. **“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”** (Ephesians 3:6). He has made his light shine in our hearts through the gospel so that we see and know and believe and trust in *the true light that gives light to the world*.

With everything we gain in Jesus—the light of the knowledge of the glory of God and the forgiveness of sins that comes through him, there's nothing we have to be afraid of giving away in thanks to Jesus—our lives, schedules, our treasures. In him we live and move and have our being, and our lives revolve around the light of his grace. Lord, let your saving light shine upon us and give light to our eyes and hearts, all the days of our life. Amen.