

January 9 2011 Sermon

Matthew 2:1–12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,

2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6 "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

11 And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

If Christmas is God giving us the gift of his Son, Epiphany is God unwrapping the gift. Epiphany is God showing us his Son, Jesus. Epiphany means the "manifestation," "the showing," When you receive a gift, you say "Thank you" to the giver. Then you open the gift and look at it, that is Epiphany. Then you use the gift in accord with its purpose: if clothes, you wear them; if a toy, you play with it; if food, you eat it.

So it is with God's Christmas gift—a gift different from all others, for in this gift God gives us himself, his heart and mind, his good will and love, his mercy and unflinching determination to make us his people forever!

In Epiphany we see God unwrapping his gift and how we are to use that gift. Epiphany is God showing us that this gift, the baby born in a manger, is God himself. In Christmas we saw that God was a man. In Epiphany we see that this man, Jesus, is God.

Epiphany is God's liturgy: God's work to redeem and save us and the world. In the liturgy God tells us the story of the world; how God comes to us in the conception, birth, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save the world from sin and death. In worship He reveals his incarnation; his presence with us. The liturgy is Epiphany: God telling us that he is here with us bodily, in word and sacrament.

Arise! Shine!

God says to you. "Your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you" (see Is 60:1)! By the light of the star, the Wise Men were led to the light, they no longer walked in the darkness of their house gods, their cultural gods, their science gods, their self-contrived gods, but they walked in the light—in Jesus Christ. By the light of God's Gospel, you are led to the light, to walk in the light. Arise! Shine! Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.

The Wise men were intelligent and learned men. They had the general knowledge of the created world. They knew the sciences, the astronomy, and the mathematics of the Babylonians. They also knew the gods manufactured by the people of the East; the gods of darkness. But they had received another wisdom as well; as gift from God. They had the knowledge of God's promises carried to Babylon by the Israelites in exile.

These educated and learned Wise Men looked for Jesus in Jerusalem. That was reasonable: you would expect the King to be born in the capital city. But Jerusalem was not the place God had chosen to unwrap his gift of salvation to all the world.

Instead, when their intelligence and learning were brought into captivity to the Holy Scriptures, the Wise Men were led to follow the star to Bethlehem, to the child and to the place in which God had chosen to give himself in the fullness of grace and truth. The star, illuminated by the Holy Scriptures, led them to the Star!

The gifts of intelligence and learning, the gift of the love of wisdom, of integrity and boldness in scholarship, are gifts of God. But it is only in Jesus that he gives us himself. This is the real work of his fatherly heart and mind. It is this grace of God that draws worshipers to himself, for by his grace God creates faith in us, faith that worships him by receiving his grace in Jesus.

That was Epiphany back then. The gods of the human intelligence, gods of cultural, religious, and human contrivance, died at the birth of the Child-God. Are we, today, merely spectators to these Gentiles becoming worshipers of the living God? How sad if that is all we are!

Here is Epiphany now. Today the call of God's grace reaches out to your ears and eyes—and to the ears and eyes of millions of believers around the globe. The Gospel of his glory, sung by the angels at Christmas, is proclaimed to you today; in the liturgy which leads us from the font of baptism through the word read and preached to the altar of his very body and blood where we are joined to the eternal wedding feast. He calls us to come worship him. In that Gospel he welcomes you, he invites you, to come to this One born in Bethlehem—the house of bread. In your ears he sounds the words that knock at the eardrums of your heart, inviting you to see him in his body, this Jesus who presents himself to us. This altar in church is his manger—his feed box, not for cows or sheep or donkeys, but for us, poor sinners, lost, troubled in the darkness of a world that neither knows nor fears nor loves him.

God has revealed to his apostles the mystery of our redemption, the secret of the kingdom of God.

The heart of God is openly displayed in this Jesus. Born of Mary, the promised descendant of David, crucified in weakness and shame, he is raised in power and publicly preached to the whole world, for the whole world. The secret—the mystery—is that Jesus, God and man, was suspended on the cross, between heaven and earth, to join us to God in one, holy, newly created people. In Jesus man and God are joined. In Jesus heaven and earth meet. In the liturgy—our worship—the here and now meets and joins the future in the eternal kingdom.

Jesus came to draw the entire world into God as signified by the Wise Men coming from the East. But how does he do it? Does God, like Socrates, wander around with a lantern looking for a righteous man? Does he go around looking for holy people to join to Christ? Or does he merely relax the rules and lower the standard? No; God does not find such holy people, nor does he merely relax the rules so that more people can be admitted into his Kingdom.

No! He is born a human in order to bind you, a sinner and unholy person, into his body, his Kingdom, that is, into himself!

The secret is not that God no longer considers sin to be sin, nor that he has no wrath against sin and sinners. No; the secret is that in the body of Jesus, God has carried your sin to death. In the blood of Jesus, God has given you eternal life—you who believe in this Son. In his Gospel, God both declares you righteous and does this work of forgiving your sin. He cuts you from your sin and binds you to Christ by faith. By the Gospel, God lifted you from darkness in death into life in his Son, for by the Gospel the light shines on you and in you to create that new creature—the one, new humanity called Church.

The secret is out. God loves you into loveliness. The King of the kingdom judges you as righteous by the righteousness that he is, that he gives, and that he brings through faith.

The liturgy in our worship is nothing other than God working on you, gathering you together in the community of believers, and making himself present with you. By the liturgy God joins you to himself; first in baptism, then through his word proclaimed, and finally draws you to the altar where you partake of the wedding banquet together with the saints who have gone before us into eternity. This is the mystery which God plays out every week in the liturgy of the Divine Service.

Moreover, the mystery of Epiphany continues to work as you leave the church. God not only creates the Church by revealing the Gospel to you, but he also makes you, the Church, part of the revelation of his secret. You become the Epiphany, as God has called you to carry that Gospel to the whole earth. He not only unwraps his gift for you, he not only offers himself to you in his liturgy, but through you he unwraps the gift of himself for the world to see and take hold of; this is Epiphany; this is Mission and evangelism which are nothing else than this one holy Church of God in motion, doing what church does.

Now some people have a distorted view of missions. Missions appear to be a burden placed on us by the Synod. Missions appear to be something somebody else does. Mission appears to be something done in some other place. Such is a misunderstanding of missions and of the Church.

Missions, evangelism, taking the gospel out into the world of your daily lives to people who have not seen the light is what the church does. The “sentness” of the Church, always begins with you, right where you are. Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was, of course, the geographical location where they were. Missions means that you are sent with the Gospel to sinners, right where you are in the world and wherever they are. Right in your own home and family. Right in your own neighborhood. Right in your own workplace or school. You are sent to each other, and you are sent to the whole world.

When you ignore the other sinner; when you want to exclude some from being hearers and believers, you misunderstand your own selves as Church. You have misunderstood the Gospel of God’s gracious will to save sinners.

In speaking that Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and inviting people to trust Jesus, God makes you his Epiphany; his display to the universe that he wants to bind you and all believers into one Body in Christ Jesus, with Christ Jesus as our head.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. If you do not shine, it is because you are not living in the light. If you work and do not let the light shine on your works, people cannot see them to glorify God.

Arise! Shine! That is, get up and listen to that Word. Get up and speak that Word. Let that Word dispel the darkness of the gods manufactured by the human spirit. Live in the worship—that is, in trusting that God is your life and good, your righteousness and hope.

It is a sour spirit that thinks “missions” are something done by somebody else somewhere else. Lift up your eyes, and see how men and women and children of every race and tongue are drawn with

you into this wondrous exchange: sinners lose their sin in the death of Jesus, and these very sinners trust him to give them forgiveness of sins, life, salvation, deliverance from death and the devil, and the lively hope of resurrection from the dead for eternal joy. Lift up your eyes. See. Your heart will leap for gladness.

Amen.