

## **Sermon: Following the Light**

1/3/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For years the wise men had been gazing up towards the stars, naming them and tracking their movements as they watched over their sheep. Then, one cold December night, something unexpected caught their eye. A new star had appeared, perhaps not so different than the “Christmas Star” we saw nearly two weeks ago. Except that this star was not simply a rare sight to behold; in our case, the first time in almost 800 years that Jupiter and Saturn have aligned. No, it was also a message from God. The star that appeared that night was an announcement that a king had been born. At long last, the King of the Jews had arrived.

Now, the star did not tell the wise men the child’s name or where he had been born, but it did convince them that they must go and give him honor; that they must pledge their allegiance to this newborn king with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So they gathered their things and departed, traveling for miles upon miles and for who knows how many months. Along the way, we hear, they asked everyone they met, “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” Each time they received the same response, “We do not know.” Eventually, they made it all the way to Jerusalem, where they went to King Herod and asked him where they might find the child. Not such a wise move if you ask me.

You see, in that instant, Herod saw his life flash before his eyes. The Jews had been awaiting the arrival of their king for over 600 years. Yes, there had always been a chance that this so-called Messiah would arrive during his rule, just like it is possible Christ’s second coming will occur during our lifetimes. But I honestly doubt that Herod expected or even seriously considered it, at least not until the wise men were standing there right in front of him. In that

moment, he could see the beginning of a revolution that would end with the crown being ripped from his head, he and his family being forced to return to Rome in shame, and some undeserving kid sitting on his throne. All that it took was one question—“Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?”—and Herod became so afraid that he was willing to do just about anything, including murder a child, to make sure that he and he alone remained king.

After meeting with the wise men, we hear how Herod called together the chief priests and scribes and asked them if they knew where the Messiah had been born. These religious leaders responded by telling him what the prophet Micah had foreseen, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a small village located just over five miles south of Jerusalem. It was then that Herod secretly gathered together the wise men, passed on to them what he had learned, and instructed them to go and look for the child. Slowly but surely, Herod, always the conniving politician, was having his fear replaced by hope. “When you have found the child,” he went on to tell them, “bring word to me so that I may also go and pay him homage.” Except, Herod’s hope lay not in his desire to worship the newborn king, but in his desire to get rid of the competition. So off went the wise men, none the wiser, to resume following the star until it arrived at Bethlehem and the place where Jesus was living. Immediately, they become overwhelmed with joy and entered the home.

Most nativity scenes, like the one right up there (motion over my shoulder) and the one we put on the altar every year, have the wise men gathered around the manger with Mary and Joseph. And while this may have been the way it happened, the decision by Herod to murder every child under the age of two suggests otherwise. It suggests that the wise men went on a very long journey and that when they finally arrived Jesus was no longer an infant, but a toddler. Now, I can imagine God causing a star to rise up and move through the sky, leading the wise

men to Jesus much like an ancient GPS. I can also imagine God using a naturally-occurring event, like the birth of a new star or the alignment of two planets, to guide the weary travelers. What I struggle to envision, as the father of two young boys, one of whom is most certainly a toddler, is the encounter between the wise men and the toddler Jesus. I mean, how many of you can see Jesus, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, looking up in fear to his mother as three strangers enter their home and begin bowing down and worshiping him? And as if this picture wasn't confusing enough, then they bust out presents. But not the kind of presents that Jesus can play with, like Play-Doh or a toy train. No, their entire journey the wise men had known that they were searching for a child, and the gifts they decide to bring were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I mean, couldn't they had chosen a little wiser of gifts?

Well, as it turns out, gold, frankincense, and myrrh may not have been the wisest of gifts for a child—I can only imagine what Tyler would do if he had received them on Christmas morning—, but they were more than fitting for a king. You see, when Jesus was born, the gift of gold was a symbol of kingship, frankincense was a symbol of a person's divine right to rule, and myrrh, an embalming oil, was a symbol of death and suffering. The wise men brought these gifts to Jesus because God had revealed to them that Jesus was the King of the Jews, and that, in some small way, his rule would be marked by suffering and his death. Today, Christians across the world are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. We are celebrating the moment in which the wise men realized who Christ is and what he will do; a realization, or epiphany, that led them to leave their flocks, travel across the desert to a foreign land, ask Herod, the King of Judea, if he knew where Jesus had been born, and pledge their allegiance to this newborn king, even if it meant putting their lives in danger and having to return home another way. Truly, the faith and dedication of the wise men is worthy of celebration. But for many Christians, especially outside

of the United States, Epiphany is something far more than a celebration of the wise men. It is one of the most important days of the church year, a day more important than Christmas. Which beckons the question, why? Why is it so important? And what have we been missing?

For Christians across the globe, what makes Epiphany so important is that God revealed Christ's birth to the wise men. After all, the wise men were not members of Israel's religious or political elite. In fact, they were not even Jews. They were Gentiles. At the time, the Jews believed that they and they alone were God's chosen people, so they never could have imagined God revealing Christ's birth to a Gentile, let alone three. And yet, that is exactly what happened. In this act, God revealed that we are all God's chosen people. It doesn't matter our age, our sex, our race, our gender, our ethnicity, or our nationality. What matters is how we respond when we see our own star. Will we follow it and pledge our allegiance to Jesus, the King of the Jews, or will we decide to stay where we are and remain who we are? Each of us is here because we have had an epiphany. In some small or large way, Christ has been revealed to us. And each time we gather together for worship and fellowship, Christ is further revealed. We have been called to sing hymns, read Scripture, pray, and receive Communion because in these acts we see and experience God. But don't be mistaken and believe that this is all that is required, for what we do as a faith community, right here, right now, is only a dress rehearsal for what God is calling us to do out there, in the real world, under the stars.

Like the star God raised that day, Epiphany is a burst of light that comes out of the darkness. It is a flash of wild hope in God for all to see. In our Old Testament reading for today, we heard the prophet Isaiah proclaim, "Look, darkness covers the earth... Yet over you the Lord dawns, and his glory can be seen over you. People, gentiles will come to your light... Lift up your eyes and look around." What Isaiah proclaimed that day has been fulfilled in our Gospel lesson.

Truly, in Jesus, the light has broken through the darkness and been revealed to Jews and Gentiles alike. All thanks and praise to Christ our King! That does not mean, though, that the darkness has been swallowed up. If there is anything that this last year has taught us, it is that, even in the midst of the light, we will still face sickness and suffering, still mourn the death of loved ones, and still have to face our own mortality. But we must not lose hope, for no matter how dark it may seem, the light is still there, visible to all those who are searching for it. This was true for the Israelites during the days of Isaiah, as Babylon laid siege to and destroyed Jerusalem, sending them into exile. It was true for Christ as he looked towards and accepted his death on the cross. It was true for early Christians as they experienced persecution by Jewish and Roman authorities. And it is true for us worshiping here today.

May we never lose sight of the light which God is shining in our lives, and may we, like the wise men, always have the faith and courage to follow that light wherever it may lead us.  
Amen.