

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Epiphany, January 6, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 126, 128:1, 130, 127, 134:1.

Lessons: Isaiah 49:1-7, Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-23.

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our sermon text is quite familiar. It is also one about which a number of traditions, ideas not found in the Bible, have grown. First, let's talk about what Scripture does not say. The word of God does not tell us that there were three wise men. The Word of God does not tell us that they were kings, as the carol sings. Scripture does not give them names. They did not come the very night Jesus Christ was born. They did not worship Jesus at the manger in the barn or stable where he was born. There is no proof that they worshiped while shepherds were present. But Scripture does tell us a great deal about these

“WISE MEN FROM THE EAST” WHO CAME TO WORSHIP THE CHRIST

- 1. A miraculous star led these wise men to Jesus.**
- 2. They wrongly assumed that he would be born in luxury in the capital city, Jerusalem.**
- 3. They worshiped him and gave generous gifts.**

This was some time after the birth of Jesus. This is plain from the fact that Scripture tells us they came to the house where Jesus was. Herod, called by secular historians “Herod The Great” was king of the Jews, put in place by the Romans and he was not really a Jew. This is the same Herod who later, perhaps even just a few days after the wise men came “*gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*” Luke 2:17.

Scripture plainly tells us that Gentiles, too, are saved by faith in Jesus Christ: “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.*” Romans 3:28-30. Today we look at wise men, Gentiles, who came to worship Jesus. “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.*” These wise men, called in the New International Version “Magi”, which is a transliteration of the Greek word, came from the East, the ‘orient’. Historians tell us that magi were a class of priests, astronomers and astrologers. Definitions also include magicians and sorcerers. Magi were often influential advisors of the King in their own country, very likely from the region once known as Babylon, now known as Iraq. From Daniel and other Jews, people in that area surely learned about the Messiah that the Jews were awaiting. This all happened more than 500 years before Christ was born, about 586 – 516 B.C. At that time the Babylonians also would have had opportunities to learn what Israel’s prophets had foretold about the Messiah. The wise men who came seeking Jesus, the King of the Jews, took these promises very seriously and believed in the God of Israel. If they had not, they hardly would’ve undertaken the long and dangerous journey to find and worship Jesus.

They came to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, where they might suppose the king of the Jews was born. The time of their coming was “*when Jesus was born*”; not as soon as he was born, or on the “thirteenth” day after his birth, the sixth of January, as the Christian Church Year Calendar might place it. Rather their coming was closer to two years after the birth of Christ, since Scripture tells us that after they left to go home, Herod slaughtered all the boys who were two years old and under in Bethlehem and the region.

They *“asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’* This title was also used at Jesus’ trial and crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, who wrote it in his inscription, and caused it to be placed over the head of Christ upon the cross. They state why they came: *“We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”* The star that guided them was a special creation of God. It may have been a conjunction of planets, or a meteor, or a comet, but they and we can certainly accept it as a special star. The Magi saw this special star when they were in the East. They saw it again when they traveled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and it guided them to the very house where Mary and Joseph were staying with the Christ child. We are reminded of the prophecy in Numbers 24:17 *“A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.”* In this prophecy, the star is the Messiah himself, not a heavenly body announcing his birth. But Jesus himself is referred to in Scripture as a bright shining light, as in 2 Peter 1:19: *“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”*

Perhaps those in Jerusalem had seen the special star, too, but had paid no attention to it. The Magi asked around looking for the king. They didn’t go directly to Herod the king and we don’t know why. How did the Magi know that this special star signified that the Messiah had been born? All we can say is that God revealed this to them. It would be natural for the Magi to come to the capital city of Jerusalem. They expected everyone there to know about the Messiah’s birth, and they were surprised when they received no information. After a while King Herod heard about the Magi and their search.

But *“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* The idea of a new king having been born without his knowledge obviously enraged Herod. He was troubled, agitated Scripture says. And, we are told that *“all Jerusalem”* was troubled with him. He was an ambitious, evil, jealous, powerful man, as even secular historians tell us, and who knew what could happen when he got angry! Herod the Great was an Idumean, a descendent of Esau, not really an Israelite. He was the first of several Herods. He was a clever and capable warrior, orator, and diplomat. History tells us that Herod did much for the people of Israel. But he was also cruel, merciless, and jealous. He had the brother of one of his wives, Aristobulus the high priest, drowned, then pretended to mourn at the magnificent funeral he provided. He had his own wife Miramne killed, as well as her mother and three of his own sons. Shortly before his death, he had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned and then gave orders that they should be executed at the moment of his own death. In that way he wanted to ensure that there would be mourning in the city at the time of his death, for he knew that otherwise there might only be rejoicing among the citizens of Jerusalem. So it is easy to see why Herod was upset upon hearing the news of the birth of Jesus whom the Magi called the King of the Jews. Even though Herod was obviously near the end of his life, he felt threatened by the reports of a newborn King. Since all of Jerusalem knew how violent Herod could be, the people, too, were disturbed when he was upset.

Well, Herod wanted to know what was going on, so *“When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.”* At least he knew whom to ask. They found the answer: *“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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”* They quote Micah 5:2 (NIV) *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”* That this plainly points to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the eternal Son of God is even plainer in the footnote in the New International Version and in the King James Version: *“But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”* (Micah 5:2 KJV)

Herod then passed information on to the wise men in a secret conference, fitting in with his political trickery. Had he revealed this information in a public reception, his own attendants might have become suspicious, but the unsuspecting visitors could be coaxed to talk freely in a private interview and would not become alarmed. The exact time of the star’s first appearance was what Herod wanted, assuming probably that the birth of the child had occurred at the same time. All of this was an especially wicked form of hypocrisy. Herod carried out his scheme: *“He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the*

child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” His lying words suggest that he really wants to worship the child. He wanted to find this child quickly. He wanted to murder Jesus.

“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On 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 and of incense and of myrrh.” This star kept going before them all the way until, as they came to Bethlehem, it took up its definite position right over the house where the Child was to be found. This star led them to Bethlehem, and it indicated exactly in which house the Child was.

They rejoiced greatly to see the star! Guided by the special star, the Magi located the Christ child together with Mary and Joseph in a house in Bethlehem. And they worshiped him and presented him with costly gifts. We could see rich symbolism in all three gifts. Precious gold suggests royalty, for Jesus was the king of the Jews. Gold, of course, would also be of immediate help to Joseph and Mary and the Baby when they had to live in Egypt. The incense reminds us of Christ’s deity. Incense was regularly used in connection with worship at the temple. Its aromatic smoke rising to the heavens symbolized the God-pleasing prayers of the people ascending to the throne of God. Myrrh symbolized the humanity of Jesus and pointed to his suffering and death. It was an aromatic resin used in perfume and in the embalming process. It also served as a kind of anesthetic when mixed with wine. That is why the Roman soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh as he hung on the cross, but he refused to drink it. That is the symbolism we could see in the gifts of the Magi. We cannot say to what extent they, at that time, understood any symbolism that seems so clear to us now, as we look back at their gifts to the Christ child. Perhaps they just wanted to give the infant Jesus the most special gifts they could bring from their homeland. The gifts are possibly the best-known facts about these wise men, these Gentiles, who came to worship Jesus.

Finally, we read *“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”* God warned them so they did not return to any place in Herod’s kingdom. The Christ child was protected from the murderous wrath of Herod. And so we see as the wise men from the East came to worship the Christ that a miraculous star led them to Jesus. He was not found where they expected him to be, but God did lead them to him. The Christ child received expensive gifts from them, and these gifts no doubt helped to “pay the bills” when Mary and Joseph were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod.

We today have the bright light of the Scriptures, the Word of God to lead us to Jesus. He is found in his Holy Word, not where men today would like to find a savior. And we have a marvelous example of Gentiles who gave the Savior the most precious gifts they could afford! May we search diligently to find the Christ Child in Scripture and take him into our hearts! Amen.

January 23, 2011 Ministry By Mail was edited for this sermon.