

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Sunday After Christmas, January 1, 2023

✝ ✝ ✝

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 127:1-3, 131:1-2, 129, 126, 127:4-5.
Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:2-12, Luke 1:67-80.
Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12.
. Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Christmas is over and you may have taken down and put away all of the things in your home which helped you celebrate the time of year from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

Now what? In the church year, Epiphany is the next season, which traditionally begins on January 6, which is the 12th day after Christmas day.

Now historically, we have no proof that Jesus was born on December 25. In fact, it may have been sometime in the spring when sheep were bearing lambs in Judea. That would be one explanation about why shepherds were **“abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”** Luke 2:8 (KJV)

Epiphany, which means appearance or manifestation or revealing, has been called “Christmas of the Gentiles” Why? Because that day, January 6, is celebrated as the time the first Gentiles came to Jesus after his birth. That also happens to be the twelfth day after Christmas Day. It is not a new idea that Gentiles have come to Jesus, although he was first sent to the Jews, the descendants of Abraham.

When Jesus and his parents were still in Bethlehem, Wise Men, also called Magi, came to worship Jesus. Today let’s look at

MESSAGES FROM THE MAGI

- 1. They brought gifts to Jesus and first of all,**
- 2. They worshipped Jesus!**

Who are the Magi? Scripture doesn’t tell us much about these Magi from “the east”. We don’t know their names, we don’t know exactly how many there were although three gifts are mentioned. They traveled a long way, perhaps with camels as artists have supposed. Historians and scholars of language believe that Magi were a class or group of learned men generally from the area around present-day Iran who were thought to have studied astrology and astronomy and they also may have had some priestly functions. Magi were often influential advisors of the king in their own country. These Magi were likely aware of Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers 24 that **“A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.”** Numbers 24:17 (NIV) These words from Numbers make reference to the birth of royalty. We do know for a fact from the Old Testament that Jews were widely scattered in the ancient world, taking their religion with them. From Daniel and other Jews, people in “the east” surely learned about the Messiah that the Jews were awaiting. The wise men who came seeking Jesus, the King of the Jews, took these promises very seriously and worshipped the God of Israel. Their worship suggests they had faith in the true God, the God of Israel.

The Magi are often first of all remembered for the gifts they brought to Jesus – gold, incense, and myrrh.

When we think of gifts, we realize that God’s greatest gift to mankind is his only-begotten Son, as Scripture tells us in one of the first bible passages we learned: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** John 3:16 (NIV) He gave! That’s a gift, greater than any gift you received at Christmas, and greater than any gift you could ever receive. And it is a gift of something that sinful mankind could never deserve. We read in Romans most plainly that **“the**

wages of sin is death.” That’s the only thing man – every one of us – could earn no matter how good we might try to be, no matter how much we might think we can do, no matter how much we may try to make even our thoughts holy. That same passage goes on to tell us that **“the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Romans 6:23 (NIV) That is the greatest gift anyone could ever receive.

But the gifts the Magi brought were God-pleasing gifts, good gifts, given, as Scripture tells us, when **“they bowed down and worshiped him.”** These gifts came out of hearts that believed that Jesus was the promised King of the Jews.

These valuable gifts no doubt helped to “pay the bills” when Mary and Joseph were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod.

Gold suggests royalty, for Jesus was King of the Jews. He was not only King of the Jews, but King of kings and Lord of lords, wanting to rule in the hearts of everyone. Gold was valuable and could be used to purchase things needed on earth.

Incense reminds us of Christ’s deity. Incense was regularly used in connection with worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Its aromatic smoke rising to the heavens symbolized the God-pleasing prayers of believers ascending to the throne of God.

Myrrh symbolized Jesus’ humanity 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 was why the Roman soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with Myrrh as he hung on the cross, but he refused to drink it.

Much has been made of the significance of the gifts, such as gold for a king, frankincense and myrrh as perfumes in preparation for his death and burial. The important thing is that they gave him gifts, valuable gifts, which are examples of gifts which reflect God’s gift to men.

That is the symbolism we see in the gifts of the Magi. We cannot say to what extent they, at that time, understood the symbolism that is 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. Then, too, we have the example for our giving gifts to God. We, his beloved children, want to give him the best, the firstfruits of our labors.

But Scripture says first of all that **“they bowed down and worshiped him.”** You shouldn’t worship someone – or some thing, anything – unless it is the true God. Pagans, of course, worship who knows what – nature, animals, wealth, power, strength, possessions, even the human body to name just a few things. Jesus himself, after his baptism, quoting the Old Testament, said **“Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”** Luke 4:8 (KJV)

Bowing was a common way of showing honor and praise to someone greater than you, someone whom you want to honor. These great men were bowing down to an infant! They knew and believed he had been sent as King of the Jews, the Savior. They wanted to worship him.

Did you notice that there is no reference to their giving any honor or praise to king Herod? The Magi had first come to Jerusalem, expecting that is where the king would be born. The question these men had for King Herod, who was a notorious murderer, make it clear that they were looking for the new-born King of the Jews.

Herod, a cruel and heartless pagan was **“was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”** People in Jerusalem knew how fiercely evil Herod could be. So when Herod **“called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.”** They knew from the Scriptures that it would be **“In Bethlehem in Judea, ... 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.’”**

“Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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.’”

Herod did not want to worship **“the king of the Jews”**. He wanted to kill anyone who might be seeking to become king. After all, he was king and wanted to keep that position and power.

The Magi had been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned home by another route. **“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he 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.” (Matthew 2:16, NIV84)

The Magi worshipped Jesus! What a great example for us, too! Christmas for many has become anything but a time to worship the true God.

We have this kind of admonition in Scripture: ***“let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*** Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)

But many don't make use of opportunities to travel and gather in person for worship, something these Magi willingly and gladly did.

Are you missing out on some of the boundless blessings God offers you? There was a time that some felt that people should avoid gatherings of other people for health reasons. Even if you think that you must avoid public worship gatherings for some health reasons, do you avoid other places where people gather?

Does worship become simply a matter of convenience? You know, 'I'll read a Ministry By Mail sermon someday or use Zoom to join a worship service if it is convenient'? Do we worship only when we feel like it? Are we ignoring opportunities when we could worship?

The Magi worshiped God, and in them we find an example and encouragement.

After worshipping the baby, the son of God and Mary, we read ***“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”*** Matthew 2:12 (NIV) Herod lied when he said he wanted to worship the new-born king. As we will hear next week, Herod murdered all the infants under two years in the region of Bethlehem – except Jesus!

In this lesson of the Gentile wise men coming with gifts to Jesus, let us remember that the greatest gift of all is the most important lesson. Jesus, God's very son, gave up his life so that we might live eternally simply by believing in him! That is the greatest gift ever! These, the first Gentiles to worship Jesus Christ after his coming to earth, searched diligently for the Savior. They gave of their best to the Savior. They followed what God says in His Word.

May their actions become our lives! Amen.