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Epiphany of Our Lord - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

01/06/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

1In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Let us pray,

Amen.

The Magi

Good morning! “We bring gifts!” the Magi declare, “Gold and frankincense! ... but wait! There’s myrrh!”

Today is the Epiphany of our Lord. But before we can talk about the significance of this day we need to take a step back and look at the Bible. The Bible is broken up into roughly two parts, what is often called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is full of different stories that were written before the birth of Jesus Christ and also goes by the names

the First Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament, which also goes by the Second Testament, is a collection of writings that were put down after the death of Jesus Christ.

Our focus today is the New Testament, specifically, the Gospels. The New Testament is broken up into roughly five sections. The Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Acts of the Apostles, letters traditionally written by the Apostle Paul, letters written by others, and Revelation... it gets its own section.

Within the Gospels, we want to look specifically at the birth narratives. That's the part that tells us how Jesus came to be born. In the Gospel of Mark, which was the first book written, we get no birth narrative, Jesus just shows up as a grown man on the banks of the Jordan. The "birth" story in the Gospel of John is all about the Word of God, having existed with God since the beginning, becoming flesh. Which leaves us with the Gospel of Luke. This is the story that we read every Christmas Eve, it's the bread and butter, the main event. When you look at the Gospel of Matthew, you don't really get that much. Tradition in the church has merged the stories of the wise magi in Matthew with the arrival of the shepherds in Luke. But Matthew doesn't have much to say in terms of birth. It's all in the passive or past. Dr. Douglas R.A. O'Hare writes in his commentary on today's Gospel that "*The Holy Family is entirely passive. Joseph is not even mentioned! Mary is seen but not heard.*"¹ Our Gospel lessons today, which picks up right after the section on the handout you received, begins with the words "*In the time of King Herod, AFTER the birth Jesus...*"² not much of a birth narrative either.

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² Matthew 2:1 NRSV

Which brings us to Epiphany; I told you we would get there! We have combined the story of the Magi over the years but it's clear that what we have today is an event that could have taken place weeks, months, or even years after the birth of Jesus. Those darn children in Christmas plays and nativity scenes have confused everyone. Today we celebrate Epiphany, the arrival and adoration of the Magi. Pastor Colleen Montgomery, currently serving at Holy Trinity in Wytheville, commented in a newsletter that Epiphany falls on Sunday only once every seven years.³ The day takes place after the last day of Christmas, which as you probably guessed, was yesterday.

Another tradition that has evolved over time was the naming of the supposed "three wise men." A few years ago we had a house blessing in at my home. It was done by Pastor Charlie Bang, and still on the door to this day in chalk are written the word 2017, and three letters: B, M, and G. Can anyone say the names with me? Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. I'm not really sure who came up with names, but they stuck. The story today makes no mention of the number of magi, or wise men, who travel to pay homage to the infant Jesus. It's safe to assume that because three different gifts are presented, people just started assuming that it was three people. But you all will remember from this day forward! The Gospel makes no mention of a specific number!

They come to worship the savior of the world. And we call this event Epiphany. Merriam-Webster defines the word as "*A usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, an intuitive grasp of reality through something... usually simple and striking (like a star!), and an illuminating discovery, realization, or*

³Montgomery, C. (2019, January 1). Taste Like Epiphany. *The Virginia Lutheran*. Retrieved from vasynod.org.

disclosure."⁴ So that's what the word means, and we've assigned it as a major day in the church calendar because it marks for us the realization that these magi have come to worship God in the flesh, born the child of a poor family.

It's an epiphany for several reasons. The first is that it reminds us that God works in bizarre ways, often using the least likely of people to work God's amazing activity. The magi (the word can be translated a number of ways, but one that sticks out is astrologers)⁵ or wise men literally walk right by the current authority and power in the area to get to Jesus. It's an epiphany for King Herod too. Can you imagine the look of surprise and confusion on his face when he realizes that his authority as literally the king of the Jews has been ignored?! Herod also realizes that along with the power bestowed by the Roman Empire that has been ignored, he also has no idea what they're talking about. You would think that the head of state might have some clue to the birth and arrival of the Messiah, but he's caught completely off guard! It's as if some foreign dignitaries arrived in Washington, D.C. and gathered together the three different branches of our Government, the Supreme Court, the President, and all the members of Congress, and asked them where the true leader of the United States of America had been born because they heard about it on Twitter... but surprisingly, none of our leaders had even noticed that it was trending topic.

Which brings us to a wonderful little point that my man Dr. Douglas R.A. Hare makes.

"The opening passage of Matthew 2 sharply contrasts the acceptance of the new king by Gentile strangers with the violent rejection of him by the Jewish ruler. For Matthew, this undoubtedly

⁴<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany> comment in parenthesis added by author

⁵Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 13

*symbolized the future rejection of Jesus by his own people and the acceptance of the gospel by Gentiles. For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between the part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our king and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!”*⁶ Hare writes. You see, Matthew is making the point that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, and the Good News spread to the least likely of places, the Gentiles. Dr. Hare is making the point that Good News for Christians can often come in the most bizarre places, traveling from distant lands, or showing up in our churches looking completely different than what we might have expected. And so, along with so many others throughout the last two thousand years, we have our own Epiphany, realizing the majesty of God’s work again and again. Amen.

⁶Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 15