

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰When [the wise men] saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; ¹¹and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.(Matt 2:10-11)

The Church cherishes the festival of Epiphany because it directs the glad tidings of Christmas to every weary soul on the face of this planet. The Epiphany of Our Lord is the glorious magnifying of Christmas so that it encompasses the whole world. If the glad tidings of Christmas is, as it were, a candle meant for the warming of Israel, the glad tidings of Epiphany converts that candle into the very sun – into yon fiery orb smiling down on our whole earth.

Recall that the Christmas angel had spoken of a “Saviour”:

For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.(Luke 2:11, KJV)

But the shepherds to whom the angel spoke were the children of Abraham. And rightfully so. After all, it was the Israelites who had long prayed for the Messiah. It was their prophets and their King David who instilled in them a holy yearning for God’s intervention on earth. We are speaking of Israel’s Messiah, Israel’s Suffering Servant, Israel’s Bethlehem. It was to the Jews that the very notion of this kind of a “Saviour” even made sense.

But the large-hearted thing about Epiphany is that the Wise Men were not Jews, but simply representatives of the nations. Epiphany means that the rest of humanity is not excluded from Christmas. Epiphany confirms what the angel had said about “all people”:

⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.(Luke 2:9-10, KJV)

Bible scholars suggest that in Israel of that time, the wise men – the magi – were not particularly esteemed. In fact, they were considered befuddled and misled, driven by superstitious notions of astrology and imagining that they could divine things by the movement of the stars.

But no matter: the chief thing about them was that they were representatives of you and me – of a humanity that is often stumbling and misguided, strangers all-too-much to the Bible, comparative pagans in relationship to the faith of Israel.

But Epiphany proclaims that even we are welcome to Jesus. His birth is good news for Israel indeed. But also it is good news for the whole world.

Three things are on my heart to say about the Wise Men: (1) They were grown men. (2) And yet they were babes somehow – infants in Israel’s faith. And (3) their journey to Jesus was hard, and they needed some help.

First point: the Wise Men in this morning’s story were grown men, with the mystery and dignity of a grown up life behind them.

By tradition, there are three Wise Men. They are even given names: Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But Martin Luther noted that these things are not certain, for they are not in the Bible. The names are not there, nor is it even certain that there were three wise men. Luther and others note that the belief in three wise men is a mere assumption based on the number of the gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but does not strictly imply that there were three givers.

No matter. One thing that is evident from the story is that we are dealing with grown men. These were men who had known childhood, along with games and love of father and mother we might hope. They had known adolescence, along with raging hormones and the adventure of sorting out what kind of persons they meant to be in this world. They had known learning or apprenticeship – some kind of introduction to the world of work. They had no doubt accomplished things, suffered things, committed sins and had been sinned against. That is, they were human beings like you and me.

Furthermore, though they did not know it, they had been protected heretofore by the God of Israel and the God of the Church. For can you imagine *anyone* on the face of this earth who is not loved by our God and whose prayers are not heard by our God? Is there any warrant in the Bible or in our faith for thinking that God could create a person only to neglect that one? Think of

Nebuchadnezzar, for example, that tyrannous king of Babylon. The Lord of Israel simply thinks of that foreign king as “my servant Nebuchadnezzar.” (see Jeremiah 27:6, for example) And what of that pagan city Nineveh? Jonah wanted the people of that town to die. He wanted them to be destroyed. But the Lord of Israel speaks of them with compassion:

And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?(Jonah 4:11, KJV)

To a child, a grown up will always remain a mystery. There is so much children cannot understand till they have trod that path themselves. But the Epiphany story looks with satisfaction and approval upon the fact that grown-ups came to Jesus, with their various mixtures of sin and virtue, and they were by no means cast out.

Let me offer a second perspective on the Wise Men. Though they were grown-ups, they were comparative babes in the faith. This meeting between baby Jesus and the Wise Men is a lovely reversal of the story of Jesus and the infants. There, the grown-up Jesus welcomes the little children, with a line we repeat in our worship folder every Sunday:

¹³Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. ¹⁵And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.(Matt 19:13-15, KJV)

And here, in the Epiphany story, we have an anticipation of this, but in reverse as far as the years go. Here, the baby Jesus welcomes the grown-ups and by no means casts them out. No word of protest is raised in sacred scripture about this Epiphany visit.

So, yes, the Wise Men are grown ups, and yet in terms of the faith of the Bible, they are mere children. They might be competent in their own professions, but they are at the very beginnings of their new profession – their profession of faith in Israel’s Messiah. If these Wise Men are to become learned, they must become like the fishermen along the shores of the Galilean shore. They must start following Jesus.

And so it shall ever be when a grown-up comes to Christ: There are miles and miles of learning to be traversed, adventures upon adventures to be pursued in the name of Jesus, and depths upon depths of Biblical story and prayer to be experienced.

It is as Martin Luther once said about the Catechism: though he is an adult, he must ever remain a child before the fundamental matters of the faith:

...a shameful and insidious plague of security and boredom has overtaken us. Many regard the Catechism as a simple, silly teaching which they can absorb and master at one reading. After reading it once they toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again... As for myself, let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher — yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning, and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly.(*Large Catechism*)

And it shall always be so: when grown-ups come to Christ, it is best for us to understand ourselves to be children, with much learning and better times ahead of us in the faith of the church.

My third observation about the Wise Men is the one that could most interest us, because it is the one with the strongest implications for the life of our congregation here at Immanuel Lutheran Church.

To begin, imagine their sheer physical labors in traveling to Jesus. These ancient Wise Men had to travel far distances in harsh circumstances, exposed to wind and rain and driven sand, vulnerable to thirst and cold and sunstroke, in danger from robbers, animals, and strange diseases.

Then reckon with their sacrifices back home – the families they left behind, their business dealings put on hold, their researches interrupted, and their prosperity diminished by the cost of their travels and the gifts they gave.

And then let us take stock of the social adversities of their journey to Jesus – the way they had to travel among a people whose language was not native to them, whose diet and ways were strange to them, who might not have been at all

impressed with their standing as magi. Plus, there was the social disadvantage of the folks back home and what would they think when they heard tell that these three fellows had traveled to some foreign village and given expensive gifts to a foreign infant.

This Epiphany travel was hard, then, for the Wise Men for physical and social reasons. But above all, they needed some heavenly help, lest they wander around forever and yet not reach Jesus. That is, they needed the star.

And the folks of our town need us to be stars! The people of our neighborhood need us to be heavenly helps to them. For some of them are as far off from the church as were the magi of old. They have no chance to learn the faith of the church, no chance to follow Jesus, no comfort of Christian life and hope unless they get some help from us. They will not learn the faith of the Church in their public schools. They are not likely to learn it from television, movies, popular music, or the opinions of their friends. The faith of the Church is no longer simply in the very air they breathe and which they learned from mother's knee. Here they are, grown-ups many of them, with all their mystery, dignity, sins and virtues, accomplishments and failures, hopes and dreams and fears, physical and social obstacles to coming to Jesus.

And here we sit, perhaps one hundred people on a Sunday morning and ten children in Sunday School... with this magnificent building, with this optimal location, with this array of talent and good hearts among us.

The good news is that if you are in sitting in this congregation today, you are amidst a people who many of us believe are on the verge of a remarkable harvest for the Lord. We have been entrusted with treasures of location, architecture, good hearts, and even some money. Our leaders are becoming filled with a holy determination to be Epiphany stars in Yorkville, that by some means we will help draw the wise men and women, boys and girls of our town to Jesus.

So ride on, you Wise Men! Do not let hunger or thirst or threat of robbery or weariness or any such thing deter you or discourage you. But keep a look out for help, gaze for your star, and press on toward the Christ Child, for he will in no wise turn you away, and in accepting you, he opens his heart to you and to me too.

To the Babe of Bethlehem be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.