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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/6/2019, Epiphany Sunday  
Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text for this morning’s sermon is from our Gospel Lesson, from Matthew Chapter 2. The Wise Men have fallen on their knees and worshiped the Christ child, they have opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and now they are ready to go back home. Verse 12, then, reads this way:

12And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

That is, they did not return home by way of Jerusalem. King Herod is in that town and he wants to kill baby Jesus. But the Wise Men have been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they head home by another way.

Still, once they get passed Jerusalem, eventually they drift back to a natural way home, and so they are likely to pass places and people they had seen before, on their way to Bethlehem. Let us enjoy this great Epiphany Gospel story, then, by imagining a young fellow witnessing the return trip of the Wise Men.

The lad stands in the farm yard, in the middle of the day. He had been awfully excited to see the caravan the first time, on its way following a star. He and his family are simple country folk, used to natural colors, not to the rich colors of these passing robes. They are used to natural colored wool from the sheep, to the browns of the soil, to the drying out of color at harvest time, to the fading away of all colors as nighttime approaches. But now it is midday and the sun illumines the brilliant colors of the robes the Wise Men wear and the decorations on the saddles and bridles of the camels. It is a magnificent sight to the boy.

And if the lad is not mistaken, there is something different about the Wise Men this time, on their way back home. They look happy. They look excited. They lean forward as if they are eager now to face life. So the boy dashes into his house and brings out his father, who invites the Wise Men to take a rest and to visit with them for a while. They agree and get down from their camels. Ah, the boy thinks to himself, “There is more spring in their step. They have newfound energy these days.”

The Wise Men begin their report by speaking of their entrance into Jerusalem. The town was quieter than they had expected. They had been seeking the newborn “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). A king! They had
figured that there would be a buzz on the streets about this little king. They had expected the *Jerusalem Times* to be filled with articles about the newborn King. But the town was strangely quiet. Nothing much seemed to be happening. Let me use some of the words of Martin Luther to describe this unexpected silence. Luther talks about the doubts it causes in the Wise Men that there should be such everyday calmness in Jerusalem. Luther imagines the Wise Men thinking these thoughts:

How desolate and confused everything appears for the birth of a king! If a young pup [a puppy] had been born, at least there would be some shouting. A king is supposed to have been born here, and yet everything is so quiet. Should not the people sing and dance, light lights and lamps, and decorate their streets with green branches and roses? What a poor king do we seek. We are fools for allowing ourselves to be so deceived and duped!” (Luther, The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matthew 2[:1–12] (LW 52)

Still, the Wise Men press on into Jerusalem all the way into the palace, to speak with King Herod.

At first Herod strikes the Wise Men as being a pious man. When Herod hears of the newborn King, his instinct seems to be to consult Sacred Scripture. He summons the chief priests and the scribes and demands of them where Christ should be born. They tell him, Bethlehem of Judea. Then King Herod privately summons the Wise Men. This is when the Wise Men begin to have some doubts about Herod. Why this private audience? Why does Herod give them marching orders, as if they were his subjects, as if they were his servants? King Herod says to them...

8 and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” (Matthew 2:8, RSV)

He speaks of worshiping the young child, and yet there is a certain look in the eyes of the King. It is a stern look—a threatening look. And so it was that when the Wise Men did find Jesus and were warned in a dream to not return to Herod, they were ready to obey the dream. Off they went for home, bypassing Jerusalem and King Herod.

Let me step out of the story for a moment in order to speculate about what troubled the Wise Men. They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they are quick to obey the dream. “There is something wrong with that man,” I imagine them saying to themselves. Again, I borrow some words from Martin Luther to express what is strange about King Herod. Luther writes this:
Assuredly, he [Herod] regarded the Scriptures as God’s word, which must be fulfilled, and Christ’s birth as God’s work which here had reached its actual fulfillment. Yet he undertakes to run headlong, knowingly and openly, full tilt, against God’s word and work. He believed he could change what God had said and done, even though he knew that it was God who was speaking and at work. (Luther, The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matthew 2:[1–12] (LW 52)

That is, the King is mad. He has lost touch with reality. Such a man is dangerous. Such a man is capable of killing, even of killing innocent babies. And so he does. He orders what is called “the slaughter of the innocents” in a vain and insane attempt to overthrow the will of God. No wonder the Wise Men were uneasy around King Herod.

And so that was an unpleasant part of the story the Wise Men tell the lad and his family. They do not much like speaking of King Herod. But the rest of the story thrills them. The star led them to an unlikely place, to a village called Bethlehem, to humble circumstances, even to a manger in a stable or some similar place. Once they reached the baby Jesus, their hearts led them to the right steps: they fell down and worshiped him, they gave him gifts — the best they had — and they left for home happy. That is what they say to the boy and his family. They are heading home as happy people. The world looks better to them than it did before. They are eager to get home, to hold their loved ones again in their arms, and to love them even stronger than they ever have before. They are happy about the world now that they have found the Christ Child. They are happy to live in a world which has a Savior!

Now, for us. Now, as you and I journey forward into this new year of our Lord 2019, let us go forward, let us lean forward, with something of the joy of those Wise Men of old. When the Wise Men reached the baby Jesus, they were reaching a Child who represents the turning point of the world. When they fell down and worshiped the Christ Child, they were worshiping a Child set to live a hard but beautiful life on earth. They had found the Child who would grow up never to be untrue either to his heavenly Father or to you or to me. That is the good state we are in. We are in the hands of this Christ Child, and that is very good news for us for any good thing we hope to do this coming year. Whether we are rich or poor, young or old, we are like those Epiphany Wise Men of old: the good work that lies ahead of us this year, is good work we can eagerly turn to. We have Jesus at our side for that good work. And the bad work that might tempt us this coming year is bad work we can firmly turn away from because we do not need that bad work. Our world does not need that bad work. And in the end we will lose nothing by forsaking that bad work because Jesus will make sure that it all works out fine in the end. Once
the Wise Men had found Jesus, they could go on their way rejoicing. As we head out into the year 2019, let us go on our way rejoicing too, because this holy Baby born in Bethlehem has been born for us too, and for our salvation and for our holy lives until that day when we see Jesus face-to-face in his glorious kingdom to come. To this Babe of Bethlehem be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen