

# **The holy gospel according to St. Matthew (glory to you O Lord)**

## **Matthew 2:1-12**

**2 <sup>1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, ‘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.’ <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:**

**<sup>6</sup> “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.” ’**

**7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then 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.’ <sup>9</sup>When 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On 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. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.**

**This is the gospel of the Lord (praise to you O Christ).**

**I bring you grace and peace and mercy from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

**In many Christian traditions, today is the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, and it's also known as Epiphany Eve. Epiphany is always celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>, and this year, Pr. Jon and Jim Miller and I decided, since today is so close to the 6<sup>th</sup>, that we would use the Epiphany lectionary readings. We sometimes call Epiphany “Three Kings Day”, and our gospel reading is the story of the three wise men – found only in the book of Matthew.**

**We are all familiar with the Wise Men from our Christmas manger scenes and our children's pageants. We love to see the gifts being presented to Jesus as the Wise Men bow before, and worship, the infant in the stable. We love to watch smiling kids with their paper crowns during Christmas programs, don't we?**

**Well . . . I hope that Pr. Jon doesn't get mad at me and never invite me back – because this morning, I am going to share with you that the way most of our churches treat the Wise Men, the Three Kings, the Magi – well, it's . . . folklore.**

The truth is, that *biblically* speaking, the Wise Men in our gospel story don't actually make it to the stable on Christmas. They arrive quite a bit later – probably two years later, and by this time, Mary and Joseph are living in a house with the baby Jesus.

And . . . as far as the Wise Men being kings – often referred to as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – a careful check of the Greek wording will confirm the men aren't kings. In fact, the best guess is that they are scholars who study the stars – they're astrologers and star gazers who quite likely are priests from another religion: Zoroastrianism.

All of this is not to say that this story is not important. It is a most helpful passage because we learn how the ruthless and villainous King Herod is taking the news that the Savior has been born. Herod's words and actions speak volumes about his fear that he will be replaced by a new and powerful king. This text from Matthew is also significant because we hear that Jesus is recognized by people from faraway lands, given gifts worthy of a king, and worshiped for who he is, God incarnate. We discover that Jesus has come not only for the people of Israel, but, instead, for the whole world.

Today, as I reflect on the text from Matthew and the church's recognition of the Epiphany of our Lord, I'll be focusing on two things from this passage – the light, as exemplified by the rising and following of the Christmas star – and the Wise Men's long, likely two-year, journey to find the Christ child, born, and still living, in Bethlehem.

All three of our Epiphany readings today help us see that God's light and glory are for all nations, for all people: Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah chapter 60 tells us, "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you . . . Nations shall come to your light." Nations, not only the Chosen of Israel.

Then Paul, in his Epistle letter to the Ephesians, tells us in Chapter 3, that, "Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel." All are heirs to Christ's promises, not only the Chosen of Israel. .... This is good news.

**We are moving into the season of Epiphany, a time of surprising things coming to light in scripture. In the weeks ahead, we will become more and more aware of the Messiah's radiance, how Christ's presence illuminates – starting with Jesus' baptism by John at Bethany on the River Jordan, when the Holy Spirit shows up and God's voice announces the astonishing news: that Jesus is the Son of God. .... Soon after, we will hear about the Savior's first extravagant miracle, that of changing a huge quantity of water into wine, thus revealing the presence and power of God among them. . . . There will be the story of Christ's life-giving conversation with an outsider, the Samaritan woman, and the call of his disciples. He will begin teaching and healing, bringing light and life and hope to the last and least by proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom and by performing amazing acts of restoration.**

**The word Epiphany means “revelation” or “manifestation”, and the three Wise Ones, Zoroastrian priests, help reveal to us that the Christ child is the one “made manifest”, .... clear and visible ..... one to worship. The journey to the Christ child began when the three saw the star at its rising and set out on a trek that would last two years, a journey to find the Messiah.**

**This week I was thinking about my last journey which took place a couple of weeks ago, over the Christmas holiday. My husband John and I set out at the darkest time of year, days with the least sunlight, flying, December 18<sup>th</sup>, out of Appleton and into Savannah, Georgia. We had decided to settle in for some restful time in a space new us. We did all the touristy things – those of you who have been to Savannah will know what I’m talking about: Walking through Oglethorpe’s squares with all the live oak trees and Spanish Moss. We stayed near the most beautiful square, Forsythe Park, with its magnificent fountain. We toured mansions, including one that served as General Sherman’s headquarters at the Civil War surrender of Savannah . . . and another mansion where the movie “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil” was filmed. We saw the Bird Girl statue housed in a museum and checked out the burial place of Johnny Mercer in Bonaventure Cemetery. Unlike the Wise Men, we didn’t have a star guiding any part of our journey. We relied on the Internet and Google maps to direct us to the most wonderful spots in an amazing historical city.**

**In addition to the mansions and museums, parks and cemeteries, we got to see beautiful “mid-1800” churches built of granite, marble, and bricks, and surrounded by intricate**

iron works. Naturally, we sought and located the local ELCA Lutheran church, Ascension Lutheran, since we were visiting over Advent 4, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day.

On Christmas Eve, though, because we didn't want to be walking too late and too far in the dark, we chose to worship at St. John's Episcopal Church, closer to our Air BnB. What an experience! Light pouring through stunning stained-glass windows as the sun began setting. A candle-lit chancel and four chasuble-wearing Anglican priests leading the service and celebrating holy communion. Their children's pageant included lovely little angels wearing LED halos. Everyone was dressed in Christmas finery . . . The light of Christ . . . and his incarnation . . . absolutely shined that evening. Our walk back through the neighborhood added to the peacefulness and beauty of Christ's arrival as a newborn babe . . . strings of colorful lights on the historic homes and mansions, twinkling, iridescent lights at Forsythe Park's fountain.

The entire evening's experience and setting, surrounded as we were by striking structures, prosperous Savannahians, and tourists like us . . . it was simply lovely. One almost had the feeling that Christ came into the world for a night such as this . . . a night of comfort and beauty.



**It was only on the morning of Christmas Day that John and I began noticing once more that the Messiah, the Word Incarnate, came to bring life and promise to all . . .**

**Things looked very different as we walked to Ascension Lutheran Church for the Christmas Day service. The crowds were pretty much gone, with just a few people strolling through the parks. We walked behind a man carrying on a conversation with himself, talking, laughing, asking and answering his own questions. He wished us a Merry Christmas. ... There was the man on the park bench asking us if we might share enough coin for tomorrow's cup of coffee. We wished him a Merry Christmas but didn't reach into our pockets. ... We saw once more the street vendor whose unskilled paintings remained for sale, his heartbreaking attempt to get people to buy a last-minute gift. . . . There was the homeless man curled up at the entrance to the Presbyterian Church. . . . The reality of Savannah on Christmas morn was in stark contrast to the night before.**

**You know, after finding Jesus and worshiping him, the Wise Men were warned by God not to return to Jerusalem as originally planned. They were sent in a different direction. Living as followers of Jesus means that we, too, are to be open to new direction, to seeing the world as it really is, not allowing ourselves to be lulled into apathy by the inherent beauty of iridescent lights or remarkable journeys to coveted new places and self-satisfying experiences ... We who are the church occasionally need reminders that we are the ones present now to share the light with the least and the lowly and the lost among us.**

**In this New Year, may our eyes and hearts be ever open . . . to Christ's true light.**

**Amen.**

**Please stand as you're comfortable for our Hymn of the Day.**