

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Des Moines, Wash  
January 3, 2010  
Epiphany Day service**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**Five Epiphany Points to Ponder:**

1. *All are welcome*
2. *Be led by the Word*
3. *Be determined to worship*
4. *Bringing offerings*
5. *Obeying God's voice*

**Hymns – Memorial hymn: 549 – Great is thy  
Faithfulness – Distribution: 83, Gathered Round –  
Cl: 72 (1,4)**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

**Matthew 2:1-12 –**

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "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."*

*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

*And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

A mysterious story that many people are drawn to is the sinking of the *Titanic*. It's a compelling story that draws interest. Many questions surround its sinking:

- Could they have avoided hitting the iceberg? How did the iceberg exactly strike the ship?
- What did the captain know and when?
- What were people's reactions as the situation became more and more serious?
- What would it have been like to see the unsinkable ship slide beneath the waves?

Proof that this mysterious story has remained popular can be seen in the crowds that attend the traveling exhibits of *Titanic* artifacts. Crowds flock to see these objects recovered from the bottom of the ocean.

Many other stories like that have a mysterious nature that draws us to them as well:

- The Boeing Museum of Flight had an Amelia Earhardt exhibit this past year.
- I'm sure many of you could tell me your JFK assassination theory concerning the number of shooters and the grassy knoll.

Today, we come across a story in Scripture that has a mysterious nature about it: The account of the Wise Men. Many questions surround this account, which is given in only one of the gospels, Matthew. Today we focus on this account. To do so, let's use one of the visuals in this story that has remained mysterious: The star. The Epiphany star has traditionally been a five-point star. Using this symbol today, Let's Learn **Five Epiphany Points to Ponder!**

## 1 – All are welcome

Our text begins: *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”*

Let's start with one of the more mysterious questions surrounding this story: Who were these men? The NIV translation calls them MAGI, which is simply the Greek word transliterated into the English (“*magoi*”). The word is a mysterious one, and has meanings such as:

- Educated ones
- Scientists
- Star gazers
- Priests

From this word we get the word “magic” and “magician.”

Who exactly were these men? The best clues we have are from the OT book of Daniel:

- *Daniel 2:48 - The king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.*

- *Daniel 5:11 – King Nebuchadnezzar... appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.*

It seems that in the eastern land of Babylon during the OT captivity, the prophet Daniel had had quite an effect on the government and its wise men and advisors. Perhaps he had a chance to explain the background of the Messiah that the Israelites were waiting for, and these roots had remained through the centuries before Christ until the star appeared.

Other than that, we know virtually nothing about these MAGI. How many were there? Some say three, because of the three gifts. Some say twelve. What were their names? Some say Gaspard, Balthasar, and Melchior. Others call them Magalath, Galgalath, and Sarasin; or Ator, Sator, and Perator. But Matthew is silent about all of this.

In seeing these visitors, what is the first Epiphany point to ponder today? We learn this in the fact that these were Gentile men from a foreign country. This teaches us that **“All Visitors are Welcome”** in the presence of the newborn King.

Not everyone is welcome to see the new child of parents today. For example, some celebrities had babies in the past couple years, and I'm not so sure you would have been welcome visitors to see the young ones:

- Angelina Jolie had fraternal twins in 2008, a boy and a girl. Would you be welcome if you showed up at the door to visit?
- Nicole Kidman had a daughter and even named her “Sunday,” but I wonder if you would be a welcome visitor to see the baby.

How much more true it is that you should not be welcome as a visitor to the baby Jesus. You don't belong. He is the holy Son of God. You are tainted with sin. You're corrupt through and through.

However, what joy we have as we see that Gentiles are welcome to see this child! I would guess that most, if not all, of us here today are Gentiles. We are not of the chosen Jewish nation of the OT. Yet this Savior has come for us as well. Isaiah 60:3 says, *"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."* The familiar verse John 3:16 tells us, *"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."* The One who has come to suffer and die for the sin of the world has come for you. He has come to die for your sins and take your punishment so you might have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life!

Now we can sing in the Christmas hymn:

**Where shepherds lately knelt and kept  
the angels' word, I come in half belief, a  
pilgrim strangely stirred, But there is  
room and welcome there for me. But  
there is room and welcome there for me.**

## **2 – Be led by the Word**

We learn a second Epiphany point from Matthew 2 as we read: *"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, '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..."*

*They went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."*

We see our second point today in the mysterious star:

- What kind of star was it?
- How did it appear as special to the Magi?
- Was it a specially created star for this story?
- Was it a regular star used by God?

Some have suggested that it was Halley's Comet making an appearance. Others have suggested that God used a super nova. Or, as the movie "The Nativity" suggests, some say that a convergence of planets caused the light in the sky. And how did God point out to them that this was a star worth following? Did he give them a vision? A dream? Did he send an angel to appear to them? Matthew is silent on all these details.

Much more important, though, is how the Magi were led when the star disappeared. When the Magi showed up in Jerusalem looking for the new King, the star was gone. They didn't know where to continue on. But when King Herod asked the religious scholars of the Jews where the Messiah was to be born, they knew clearly from Scripture. Micah 5:2 said that the lowly town of Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Messiah. They were led by the sure guide of God's Word.

This leads us to our second Epiphany point today: **Be led by the Word.**

Why is this important for us? First of all, because God has not promised to send a natural star to lead us through this life. Secondly, the wisdom of the world around us will not provide the spiritual strength you need. If we gathered a panel of the most intelligent people in Seattle – university professors, scientists, community leaders – and had a round table discussion on true wisdom and what the purpose of life is, I shudder to think what would come out of that conversation! The only sure guide we have through this life is the Word.

How can we be led by the Word in 2010 and beyond? I have two suggestions for you today:

- 1) I'd like to encourage you to read through the Bible in the coming year. When is the last time you've done this? But I don't want to simply say that and leave it up to you. I'd like to give you a practical way that you can follow through with this. In the Sunday bulletins all year long, you will find in the box on the right side a schedule for the week. It will have the days of the week listed, along with the reading(s) for each day. If you follow through and do these each week, by the time the year is over, you will have read through the entire Bible. Each day should take about 14 minutes.
- 2) Here's another suggestion. For a Christmas gift to our family this year, we purchased the Zondervan NIV audio Bible. The version we bought is the best I have ever heard. It has different people speaking different parts, and appropriate background noises for the stories and readings. Perhaps you could buy a set like this and keep it in

your car or your kitchen and listen to the Bible during the year.

### 3 – Be determined to worship

Let's learn our third Epiphany point today. Matthew 2 continues, "*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.*" That may not seem like a profound sentence at first, but think about their journey to come worship:

- How far did they travel to get there? Hundreds of miles?
- How exactly did they travel?
- How long did their journey actually take? Up to two years?

Again, we don't have answers to those questions, but we do take note that when they arrived, they immediately worshiped the King they had come to see. In the custom of the day:

- Eye contact would be at a minimum
- Respect and awe would be at a premium
- Joy was also felt by these worshipers
- They fell down, lying on their faces before him

Can you imagine the sight of these grown men entering and worshiping this young baby? Can you imagine Mary and Joseph's reaction to this? Yet they were not ashamed to do exactly that which they had come so far for. Here is our third Epiphany point today: **Be determined to worship.**

Again, that may seem quite simple, but how many Christians have been tempted to say:

- I'm too busy to worship this week. Don't you know how valuable my time is?
- It's too far for me to come weekly to worship. Have you seen the price of gas?

Also, what is our attitude when we come to worship the King each week? I want you to think about how you would approach meeting earthly royalty. For example, if you had a meeting with the Queen of England, how would you approach that? What would you wear? How would you carry yourself?

I fear that many people look at coming to be in the presence of the King in his house rather casually. Some give little thought to the clothes and the manner in which they present themselves. We certainly cannot be legalistic in a dress code for worship or promote a hypocritical atmosphere about ourselves. Yet we must remember who we're coming to present ourselves to at worship and feel the awe that the Magi felt long ago.

What about the joy? Has worship become listless and joyless to you? The material of the law and gospel has not changed. The liturgical worship we do every week has not changed. Perhaps a renewal of concentration and appreciation is needed as we realize where exactly we are. Perhaps a good night's sleep to be in a good frame of mind is helpful. After all, we're in the presence of our Savior, the King, to receive his forgiveness!

## 4 – Bringing offerings

We continue on: *“Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”* Ah yes, the mysterious gifts that these men

brought. Why did they present these particular gifts? Some have suggested that:

- The gold was a fitting gift for royalty
- The incense recognized Jesus deity, as prayer and incense go together
- The myrrh recognized Jesus humanity as a lotion, perfume, and anesthetic

Other possibilities for these gifts' meanings have been suggested, but we must admit we don't know the exact purpose for which they were brought. What we do know, though, that bringing offerings to the King is a natural response. The gifts they brought were:

- Generous
- Planned
- Firstfruit
- Sacrificial

As we look ahead to the New Year, we can learn a lesson for our lives. When it comes to giving our offerings to the church's ministry, unfortunate thoughts can enter a person's mind that are not so sanctified:

- A lack of trust that God will not provide, so I can't be generous in my offerings
- A feeling that it's "my money" rather than what God has chosen to loan you
- Having a bad balance between the extras we spend our money on and the offerings we bring to God's house
- Giving God the leftovers rather than the firstfruits
- Feeling no joy in our giving

Looking ahead to the New Year, we passed a budget as a congregation that would like to add a second pastor on July 1<sup>st</sup>. To do this, an increase of about 6% is necessary in our offerings. For a church our size, a second pastor would be a great blessing in ministering to the flock among us. Will we be able to carry through in this desire and do it? We will if we look at our offerings as the Magi did. We certainly can if we giving our offerings:

- Generously
- Planning ahead
- Giving firstfruits
- Sacrificially

## 5 – Obey God’s voice

We’ve come to the fifth and final Epiphany point today. Our text closes by saying, *“Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”* King Herod had told these men to come back and report to him where the new King was so he could come and worship also. But this was a lie. He wanted to destroy this King that he viewed as a political threat. So the Lord gave them a vision to avoid Jerusalem on their trip home. Obediently, in spite of any danger that might have come to them, they followed the Lord’s instructions and Herod never found out where Jesus was.

Here we see our fifth lesson today: **Obey God’s voice.** In our lives, as we said, we will have many voices giving us advice and guidance. We will have many choices that we will make every day. On what basis will we make them? Will we make choices that are tainted by:

- Anger
- Dishonesty
- Immorality
- Envy
- Greed

- Hate
- Weakness

2 Corinthians 5 tells us, *“Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”* The love of Christ compels us to follow God’s voice! Our Savior has died for our sins and purified us from them. Why would we want to go back to the old ways? May we obey God’s voice in the coming year and beyond!

We have come to the end of the “mysterious account.” This will undoubtedly remain one of the more mysterious accounts in all of Scripture. But as we close our look at the Wise Men today, let’s marvel that God has told us the most important details. They are all we really need to know about this story. The spotlight remains where it belongs.

**May we remember these five Epiphany points to ponder:**

- 1. All are welcome**
- 2. Be led by the Word**
- 3. Be determined to worship**
- 4. Bring our offerings**
- 5. Obey God’s voice**

As we do, may we be motivated by the same love and faith that we see in the Wise Men, being confident that one day we will see these mysterious believers with our own eyes in heaven! Amen.