



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

[www.mzluth.org](http://www.mzluth.org)

January 6, 2008

The Festival of Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 72

Second Lesson: Ephesians 3:2-12

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

### **Come Worship the King!**

The Festival of Epiphany—I believe in my ministry this is only the second or third time I've actually ever celebrated it in a regular church service. A couple of years ago we celebrated it here when it fell on a Thursday and then had a different service on Sunday, the first Sunday after Epiphany. And if I remember correctly, it was just the regular Thursday crowd that comes on Thursday. I don't think there was an uproar of people coming to celebrate the Festival of Epiphany. I suppose we don't make much of a deal of it now because it falls so close after having New Year's Day, New Year's Eve, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and all the other special services that go along with it. But in the early church, Epiphany was second only to Easter. It was celebrated already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, long before Christmas was ever celebrated. It originally was celebrated as the Festival of God revealing himself as God-man, the incarnation, God becoming flesh. It didn't celebrate a day, but it celebrated the fact that God became one of us and revealed himself as one of us in order to take away our sins so that we could approach God cleansed by the life and death of Christ.

When the early church decided to change a pagan festival into the celebration of the date of Christ's birth even though they had no clue when that date was, Epiphany changed more to revealing God as the God of all people, not just the Jews. In fact, to this day in the Eastern Church, this day is still celebrated as the incarnation. It is the "Gentile Christmas" literally for many within the realm of Christendom.

Really, it's an important day for us. The Shepherds that came to Jesus on the night of his birth were all Jews. The people that knew about him being born first of all were all Jews. This is the first time we see non-Jews knowing Christ as Savior, worshipping Christ as Savior, having God reveal to them that Jesus is the Savior. I think that is important to you and me because as far as I know, we don't have an overabundance of Jewish blood flowing through our pews right now. I think we are all pretty much Gentiles. This day is here to remind us that God is for us.

So as we focus on that truth, God is not only for the Jews but also for us, what does that lead us to do? It should lead us to do the same thing it led those first Magi to do, which is to come worship Christ. And as you consider what they did and how they did it, it probably teaches us what it means to come worship Christ. When you look at the life of the Magi and what they went through, you saw how they overcame obstacles. They had plenty of opportunities to turn around and go home, but they didn't.

We also see why “worship the king” means give generously, out of love, out of gratitude, out of thanks. And then finally we see that “come worship Christ” is not only the time we think of as being in his presence, like being in this building, its something we do at all times because we are always in his presence. And we see how the Magi do that as they serve lovingly as they come to worship Christ.

Think about their obstacles. First of all, who are the Magi? The word itself we translate at times as “wise men”, but it’s advisors. It’s the priestly class who studied the stars for the celebration of various festivals and events which made them part of priests of wherever they were. Others say they were wise men who simply studied the stars, but the study of the stars would have been part of it, and they were advisors to kings. They probably weren’t kings. Definitely they probably weren’t kings like we sing “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” And we don’t know that there were three. “Magi” is plural. We know there was more than one. That is as specific as we can get. We usually talk about three because there were three gifts. But we don’t know how many there were.

We know they came from the east. “We have seen a star in the east and we have come to worship him.” Some think that the Magi were people that came from an area of Babylon where Daniel had been. That would be to the east about 500 miles away. Daniel, we are told, was the head over the wise men for the king and the one thing you know about Daniel is that he wasn’t afraid to share his faith or to live his faith no matter what the consequences were, right? So they may well have known the prophecy “a star will come out of Judah who will be king over my people.” That comes of Hosea. Then maybe they saw this star and connected the dots and the Lord led them to see this. That makes sense. It could be.

Others say from what we heard in Isaiah. “The wise men came from Sheba.” Do you remember that in what we just read from Isaiah? Sheba would be modern day Yemen. It would be three times as far away—1500 miles away. Either way, 500 miles or 1500 miles away, they came from a great distance. They had seen the star. They followed the star that moved in the wrong direction—from east to west. Not necessarily a natural star. Something God had provided for them. And they traveled 500 miles, but what’s the big deal? Let’s say it was 500 miles, what’s the big deal? That’s what, an 8-hour or 9-hour drive? You stop at a couple of McDonald’s on the way, maybe breakfast and lunch, and then you are there, right? It was a little different for their travel, right?

Five hundred miles is quite a long journey. Fifteen hundred miles is an incredibly long journey that they would have had. Think of how often they would have thought, “What are we doing? We are following some light.” Think of how Satan would have been attacking them by telling them to turn around and go home. “You left a good job behind. You had power. You had prestige. You were important and now you are chasing some light that’s going the wrong way. What are you? Nuts?” They had a lot of time to think about that, right? They couldn’t exactly listen to the radio. They couldn’t stop and relax and walk around the mall for awhile. There is so much stuff we take for granted that they couldn’t do. They were riding camels or whatever it might have been and pulling gnats out of their teeth. It sounds like fun, right?

These guys impress me. I think their faith is impressive, because I know what we are like. We do an hour and fifteen minutes in a worship service and then talk about pulling gnats out of your teeth, right? We think we have done so much for the Lord that the Lord owes us a few weeks off now, right? “The pastor talked way too long last Sunday. I need a few weeks off now. I’m ahead.”

Think of the obstacles they had to overcome. And then when they start getting to where they think they are, what happens to that star? It disappears. “Thanks a lot God. You got me some 500 miles away from home or whatever it is and now the star is not around. Now what am I supposed to do?” So they go to Jerusalem, to the capital city, probably expecting the city to be rejoicing because they figured out the king has come too, right? Go to the king and say, “Where’s the new king? Where’s the one who was born king of the Jews? We have seen the star. We have come to worship him. We are pretty excited! We are really pumped up about this! I’m sure you are too.” And they reply, “When was he born? Really, tell me. Exactly when was it? No, really, I need to know.”

Herod is disturbed and it says all of Jerusalem is disturbed with him. It says they are wise, right? They must have picked up on this—that Herod is disturbed by the news and the people are getting shook up. It makes sense that the people were getting shook up because the saying went at the time of King Herod the Great, “it was safer to be his pig than to be his son.” Herod was a Judean. He wasn’t a Jew by birth, but he wanted to live by the Jewish laws, so he wouldn’t eat pork. So if you were his pig, you were safe. But if you were his son and he perceived you as a threat to his throne, well, he put some of them to death.

So, if King Herod gets disturbed, does it make sense that the people are a little disturbed? And also, the people might think about the one who is the fulfillment of prophecy, maybe this is what Hosea and the other prophets were talking about. Maybe this means deliverance from the Romans. Maybe this means deliverance from Herod. The people get a little disturbed too as they contemplate what all these consequences might be. But evidently the news traveled through Jerusalem.

So Herod has his wise men come together and asks them, “Where is the king to be born? Where is the Messiah to be born?” And they point rightly to the prophecy about Bethlehem. So Herod tells them, “Go on your way, but when you find him, let me know because I really would love to go worship him too.” So they start going again. As they start going, all of a sudden the star appears again. Put yourself in the wise men’s shoes. Would you be saying, “God, why did you make me go through that rigmarole with that Herod fellow? He is kind of creepy. He scares me a little bit, God. I would just as soon not ever have met him. Why couldn’t you just keep the star going there? God, don’t you know what you are doing?” They probably had to overcome the obstacle of their own sinful nature, and they did, didn’t they? We are told they were overjoyed when they saw the star again. They didn’t spend their time whining about what God didn’t do. They thanked God for what he did do.

Boy, there's a life lesson, right? Do you think your blood pressure might drop a few points if you spent more time thanking God for what he does instead of worrying about what he hasn't done that you want him to do? I know mine should.

Think of all those obstacles. Losing their direction, traveling that distance and how they persevered through it all. I don't think they did it all perfectly. I think they were sinful human beings that probably whined along the way at times just like you and I do. But when they kept their eyes on the promise that God had made, that a Savior was to be born, however they had found out about that promise, they overcame these obstacles. They came and these wise men walk in the door and there is the King of the Jews and what is he?—a toddler? One-year-old, maybe two-year-old, I don't know—less than that obviously, right? And what do they do when they see this toddler? We are told they bowed down and worshipped him.

Besides changing diapers, when is the last time you bowed down to any one- or two-year-old? Do you think you would have been expecting something more if you were the wise men? Do you think you would have said, "God, this doesn't seem right"? But they kept their eyes on the promise God had made and they overcame these obstacles. Did you notice how they overcame the obstacles when they were in Jerusalem? When everything else failed, where did Herod and his wise men have to turn to find the answer? Same place you and I should be turning at the beginning to find our answers. It is written in the Word of God.

You and I have the Word of God to turn to when we face life's obstacles. We can go to that Word and hear his promises and focus on his promises and sure, it is going to be hard at times. We are going to look at things and they are not going to make sense to us. We are going to say, "Are you sure, God? What about this? What about that?" But when we focus on God and his promises, we find the strength and the ability to overcome them and we worship him as we overcome those obstacles. We keep our eyes on him. That is the heart of worship, putting your eyes on God and who he is and what he has done—how he has taken away our sins through the life and death of Christ, how he promises to be with us, how he assures us that he is in control even when we can't see it. Those wise men had a lot of time to think that God wasn't in control anymore. But they trusted like a child and God led them to worship the child.

They also worshipped him not only by bowing down but by opening their treasures and giving him gold and incense and myrrh. Expensive gifts, rare gifts, gifts that they had to schlep along for over 500 miles or 1500 miles or whatever it was, gifts they had to keep track of, gifts they had to protect, but isn't it kind of amazing that God calls these things "gifts." God says that the Magi came. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts. God views what they gave to Christ as a gift. Isn't that kind of odd? If my children take my wallet and say, "Here Dad, here's a gift of \$20. Don't you love me more now?" What are you going to think? It's no gift. It was mine to begin with, right? You are just in my wallet.

The wise men, they give God the gold, the incense and the myrrh. It was God's to begin with, right? God had provided it to them. It was his to begin with. Look at the grace of God in that he calls what we offer up to him "gifts." They were his to begin

with. They are his at the end. They are always going to be his. And yet, in his mercy and his love he accepts them in love, views them as gifts of our love for him, and considers them gifts.

Our worship of the Lord also involves our giving to him the gifts of our time, our talents and also our treasures. We do it for the same reason that the Magi did, because we love God and we trust his promises, because we know who he is and what he has promised. And we know more than those wise men. We are wiser than them, because we know what happened to the Christ child. We know that he lived perfectly in our place. We know that he carried every last one of our sins, every last one of our whines, every last one of the times that we gossip and we run each other down instead of defending each other like we talked about on New Year's Eve—love one another deeply, from the heart. That's something we always need a reminder on, isn't it?

There are so many times that you and I (even within a Christian congregation where we have these bonds of love uniting us) instead of giving the gift of love from the heart, we give the gift of gossip from the heart. And we are the poorer for it. But we worship him because he has taken away all those sins. All those times we stand around instead of working and just gossiping, Christ has removed them all so that we can now not only love each other deeply, from the heart, but love God deeply, from the heart, and give to him what God graciously considers our gifts, even though they are his to begin with and he gave them to us.

That is how we worship him. That is how we say, "This is the love I have for you. Here is tangible evidence of it. Not only my thoughts and my words, but also my actions." Then we worship the Christ child.

After they had worshipped him—I don't know how long they were there. I doubt they walked in and said, "Here are the gifts. See you. Gotta go!" If you went that long, I think you would have sat there and heard from Mary and Joseph everything that had happened, how these angels came and talked to them and how some shepherds came the night Jesus was born—all those things Mary had been pondering in her heart I imagine she repeated to these wise men because I would think they would want to soak up every word. Who knows how long they stayed and learned and listened. But then they started to go back and perhaps they were going to go back to Herod, but God comes and warns them in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they return to their country by another route. I'm guessing it wasn't a shortcut. I'm making the assumption that it was inconvenient for them. And yet, they served God lovingly by obeying. They served God lovingly by going a different route, inconveniencing themselves, because this is how they can serve God and protect the one they believe is their Savior. We aren't told that the wise men spent the way home complaining about "Man, we'd be home already if we wouldn't have had to take this extra trip around Jerusalem." The trade caravans went through Jerusalem. Yet, they do it.

Maybe they did complain. They are sinful human beings, maybe they did complain. Maybe they are just like us and they said, "Man, how come we had to do this? Why couldn't God have just given us an invisibility cloak and we could have walked right past him and he wouldn't have seen us? How come he couldn't strike Herod dead so we

wouldn't have to worry about it? How come he couldn't do this? How come he couldn't do that?" We aren't told that they did that, but even if they did, they also were covered by the blood of Christ just like you and I are when we whine and complain and carry on.

When we view our service to the Lord as a burden instead of a joy and a blessing, Christ's love takes away that sin as well, because it is sin. It is a sin that killed Christ when we are serving the Lord and are complaining about doing it. Other people could serve the Lord, but instead of focusing on who is not doing it, maybe we should just find the joy that is ours and sing, "Lord, I love you with all my heart. Here's the service I have to offer you now."

I know that I'm not always good at that and I'm assuming you aren't either, but the closer we get to the Christ child, the better we will get at doing it. The closer we get to the Christ child, the better we will be at coming and worshipping the king, and not only will that be a blessing to God, but it will be a blessing to you and me because we will walk around more often in the peace of our salvation instead of in the troubles of our worries.

How great is it that God enables us to walk around in the peace of our salvation!