

**Epiphany – January 6, 2013**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

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**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 2) 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." 3) When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4) 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. 5) "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6) "'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.'" 7) Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8) 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." 9) 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. 10) When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11) 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. 12) And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.**

Dear Friends,

Merry Christmas – the greeting seems out of place already, doesn't it? There may be a few remnants of our Christmas celebrations left but soon even those remnants will be packed away for another year. I don't think that I'm a Scrooge when it comes to celebrating the major festivals of the church year like Christmas and Easter – but sometimes those celebrations and all of the preparations that go with them seem to miss the mark. That's why I've come to appreciate days like Ascension and Epiphany which have not been intruded upon with all kinds of extraneous activities. Like I said, I'm not a Scrooge. I do enjoy celebrating the major festivals. I also enjoy some of the lesser known ones like Epiphany – the Gentile's Christmas. So Merry Christmas to you!

Today without the hype, without the distractions, without decorations, without the parties we have a chance to experience the joy and gladness of God's gift of a Savior once again as we pray: Dear Jesus

**Theme:** As with Gladness Men of Old

1. May we evermore be led by thee
2. May we ever seek thy mercy seat
3. May we our costliest treasures bring

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2) 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."**

How long after Jesus was born did this event take place? Who were these Magi – who some call kings and others call wisemen? Were they really three kings of the Orient as the popular carol suggests? What was the special star that guided them? These are distracting questions and I because I want us to be able to celebrate without distractions I'll take just a bit of time – a teensy weensy bit – to address them before we focus on the certainty of Matthew's Gospel.

- v Question 1 – How long after Jesus was born did this event take place?  
Answer: We don't know.
- v Question 2 – Who were these Magi – who some call kings and others call wisemen?  
Answer: We don't know.

- v Question 3 – Were they really three kings of the Orient? Answer: No.
- v Question 4 – What was the special star that guided them? Answer: We don't know.

Well, just maybe I better spend a bit more time with those questions to help us sort out myth from reality. Honestly all that we really know about this event for sure is recorded in Matthew's Gospel and he didn't get into a lot of details.

From the rest of Scripture we can draw some hypothetical conclusions about the origin and identity of the Magi. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that they were from the far East – from the part of the world we commonly call the Orient. The most likely conclusion we can draw on the basis of Scripture is that these men were scholars (and perhaps astrologers from the region of Babylon where God allowed Daniel and other Jewish individuals to serve as advisors to the king when the nation of Judah was deported there during that OT time period which we know as the Babylonian Captivity. If this is so, they could have learned of the promises of King of the Jews from the prophecies of Daniel which could have been passed down to them through the generations. Many absurd traditions and guesses respecting these visitors to our Lord's cradle have found their way into popular belief and into Christian art. They were said to be kings, and three in number (because of the three different types of gifts mentioned); they were said to be representatives of the three families of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and therefore one of them is pictured as an Ethiopian; their names are given as Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, and their three skulls, said to have been discovered in the twelfth century by Bishop Reinald of Cologne, are exhibited in a priceless casket in the great cathedral of that city. Let's set that distraction aside and simply be content to understand that these men however many of them there were (and we don't know for sure what that number was) were Gentiles – they were not descendants of Abraham. But none-the-less they were drawn to the light of the World in fulfillment of our OT lesson which proclaimed: **“Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”** (Is 60:3) Through the Gospel they became heirs of salvation and eternal life together with Israel. (Eph. 3:6)

That's enough about them for the moment – what about the origin of that star? Much has been written about this Christmas star. Some well-meaning astronomers have suggested that perhaps Jupiter and Venus came together in their orbits at this time. That may be interesting but it's not certain and really not all that relevant. What is relevant is that they saw the King's Star – one made by him through whom all things were made and that this star, however he made it, accomplished his purpose of leading them to him.

So much for distractions which would rob us of our gladness and joy which those men of old felt as they raced to the place where the Lord Jesus was staying following his birth. It was the star which God used to capture their attention but it was ultimately the word which led them to Jesus. **When [Herod] had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5) "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6) "'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.'"** The words of the prophet led the Magi to the city of Bethlehem and their Savior.

*As with Gladness men of Old Did the guiding star behold,  
As with joy they hailed its light, Leading onward, beaming bright,  
So, most gracious Lord, may we Evermore your foll'wers be.*

May we evermore be led by thee is an appropriate prayer for us today and every day. Lead us to place our faith and our trust in you as we gladly dig into your word seeking the wisdom that only it can provide. When it comes to seeking God and his blessings – there is only one sure source for that information – oddly King Herod who was thrown into a desperate panic attack at the sheer thought of a rival king understood that. He turned to the chief priests of the people and sought the information in the Scriptures and yet neither he nor the majority of the citizens of Jerusalem paid any heed to the information.

Apparently King Herod and the citizens of Jerusalem were in the dark about Savior's birth. They weren't watching and waiting for the Messiah to come and they missed him. They weren't being led by his word and guided by it. And when news of his birth came they were distressed and distracted by it – Herod in his unbelief even took drastic steps to be sure that this King wouldn't be a threat to him. Interestingly before this child was even 12 years old the Lord ended Herod's Kingship – the one which he so desperately tried to hang on to by killing the babes of Bethlehem.

Are things that different today? Not really. The Christian church is comprised primarily of Gentiles today – people like you and me who have no connection to the family line of Abraham and the Jewish nation. Some people still come from afar to worship the Lord Jesus and to be guided by his word and blessed with the Sacrament. When I served in a WELS mission congregation in Rochester, NY I came into contact with individuals who had gladly driven over 100 miles each week to attend services at the nearest WELS congregation. Many of the members of that congregation regularly drove 25 or more miles each week to worship the Lord – while people living right in area where our worship services were held were seemingly oblivious to him. Today I frequently have the privilege of reaching out to individuals who have grown up with the blessings of the Gospel but who have seen the light and who want to learn more about their Savior. What a joy it is to work with these individuals in the Bible Information Class – to observe how the Lord works in their hearts leading them to follow him. How sad it is on the other hand to see some who have grown up in the Church, attended Sunday School and other Christian Schools, who participated in confirmation classes and who had the benefit of living in the Light of the Lord turn away from that light – and turning toward the darkness of sin as they neglect the Lord and his word.

By the grace of God we have been lead by the Lord to gather here today around his word. May that word show us Jesus our Savior, may it strengthen our faith in him, may it lead us to seek his mercy seat.

*As with joyful steps they sped, Savior, to your lowly bed,  
There to bend the knee before You whom heav'n and earth adore,  
So may we with willing feet Ever seek your mercy seat.*

As the magi speed with joyful steps to Bethlehem they were seeking the Messiah – their Savior. And so we also want to seek the Lord's mercy seat. But just what is a mercy seat and why is it important to us? Now that's a question which leads to the heart of the true celebration of the season. Just as the wisemen were directed to the Scriptures to find the answer to their question so we can look to the Scriptures to discover an answer to our questions regarding the mercy seat.

The mercy seat covered the OT ark of the covenant which was found in the inner chamber of the temple. It was made of gold. Two golden angels which faced each other with outstretched wings came together over the top of the mercy seat – constituting the throne of God. On the great day of atonement in the OT the High Priest would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat 7 times to make atonement for the people – to put them in a proper relationship with God. God himself gave these instructions for making the mercy seat: (Exodus 25:17-20) **"Make an atonement cover of pure gold--two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide. 18) And make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. 19) Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover, at the two ends. 20) The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover.**

The sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat provides a vivid reminder that only the shedding of blood can atone for sin. When the OT people celebrated the day of atonement they were looking ahead to the time when the blood of Jesus would purify them from sin and restore them to a holy relationship with God. Seeking the mercy seat is seeking the Lord's forgiveness – that puts things into perspective for us, doesn't it? How often haven't we failed to follow the Lord and his will for his lives? Have we perhaps been numbered among those who are not being led consistently by his word? Are we numbered among those who have easy access to the Word but fail to use it?

The beginning of a New Year often is a time when people exam their lives and make resolutions in an attempt to change for the better. As Christians we can examine our lives too – we can identify our sins and we can come confessing them to the Lord and pleading for mercy at his “Mercy-Seat” with confidence because Jesus has shed his blood to wash away our sins and to restore us to a holy relationship with God.

And you and I don’t have to wait for a special time of the year to do this. Each day we can come before our God in repentance and prayer – humbly confessing our sins and joyfully acknowledging the forgiveness which is ours for Christ’s sake. May we always gladly seek his mercy-seat. And may we bring to him our costliest treasures of praise and thanksgiving.

While Herod was putting together his evil plots and plans to eliminate any competition for his earthly throne the wisemen were concerned about being part of an eternal kingdom. Herod pretended to express an interest in spiritual matters. He even told the wisemen that they should seek out the Christ and report back to him so he could also 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. 10) When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11) 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.**

The wisemen had already sacrificed their time and their energy in their quest to bring their gifts to Jesus – now the opened their treasures and gladly presented the Lord with gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. It has been said that you can give without loving but you cannot love with out giving. Whenever people truly worship the Lord Jesus, gifts of time, talent and treasure are freely and cheerfully given. The gifts that we give all originally came to us as blessings from our loving God. They are reminders of the perfect gift – the gift of a Savior that God has given to us. And we see in those gifts opportunities to serve our Lord and to thank him for all that he has done.

Those men of old really had a single focus after seeing the Lord’s star in the East – they set out to follow that star as it led them to their Savior. They came to him with their treasures acknowledging him as their Savior King. In this account everything points to Jesus. And that’s how it is to be for us – that everything points to Jesus. As we are led by him we will set aside our sinful wishes, desires and interests to seek him and his will for our lives – gladly going where he points us just as the wisemen gladly followed the star and gladly returned home by another route after the Lord warned them of wicked King Herod’s evil plot.

In faith we will daily confess our sins before the mercy-seat of God – his throne of grace trusting in his forgiveness and seeking his help in setting aside those sins and in offering our lives as living sacrifices in which we will give of our best praises and thanks. And so we pray:

*As they offered gifts most rare At your cradle, rude and bare,  
So may we with holy joy, Pure and free from sin's alloy,  
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to you, our heav'nly King.*

*Holy Jesus, ev'ry day Keep us in the narrow way;  
And, when earthly things are past, Bring our ransomed souls at last  
Where they need no star to guide, Where no clouds your glory hide.*

*In the heav'nly country bright Need they no created light;  
You its light, its joy, its crown, You its sun which goes not down.  
There forever may we sing Alleluias to our King!*

Amen.