

# Sermon for The Epiphany of Our Lord

**Date:** January 6, 2018

**Location:** St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

**Old Testament:** Isaiah 60:1-6

**Epistle Reading:** Ephesians 3:1-12

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 2:1-12

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 2:1-12

**Sermon Title:** Characters of Christmas – The Wise Men

**Introit:** Psalm 45:6-8a; Antiphon Psalm 45:17

## Hymns:

LSB 412 – The People That in Darkness Sat (v.1,3,4,6)

LSB 946 – Glory to God, We Give You Thanks and Praise

LSB 397 – As With Gladness Men of Old

LSB 370 – What Child is This (v.3)

LSB 394 – Songs of Thankfulness and Praise (1,5)

LSB 398 – Hail to the Lord's Anointed (v.1,2,4,5)

## Distribution:

LSB 413 – O Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair

LSB 400 – Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning

## Liturgy:

Divine Service I, p. 151



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

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea when Herod was king. After Jesus' birth wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the one who was born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star rising and have come to worship him."

When King Herod and all Jerusalem heard about this, they became disturbed. He called together all the chief priests and the experts in the Scriptures and tried to find out from them where the Messiah was supposed to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem in Judea. The prophet wrote about this: Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah. A leader will come from you. He will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called the wise men and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. As he sent them to Bethlehem, he said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you have found him, report to me so that I may go and worship him too."

After they had heard the king, they started out. The star they had seen rising led them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were overwhelmed with joy to see the star. When they entered the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary. So they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they left for their country by another road.

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Grace, peace, and mercy to you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Wise Men recorded in Matthew's Gospel are a mysterious lot. They, like many people that peak our interest in the Bible, appear and then disappear never to be heard from again. These men come to Jerusalem from the East. They visit Jesus and then disappear into the annals of time. Some new scientific evidences<sup>1</sup> have helped us better guess when they might have arrived, where they might have come from, and how they were led to Jerusalem, but it still remains a miraculous and mysterious encounter.

We do not know how many wise men there were. Traditionally it has been assumed there were three because three gifts were given. We know they did not arrive on the night of Jesus birth in the manger, but rather several months later at a house. We know that they caused quite a stir among the people of Jerusalem so they probably arrived with a fairly large entourage as they entered Jerusalem. Beyond that we don't know very much. All we can do is make some assumptions based on what we do know and then maybe, just maybe, see something about what could have been.

Tradition has given us names for the three wise men. Those names are Caspar {CASS-par}, Melchior {MEL-key-or}, and Balthazar{BALTH-as-ar}. They were probably Jewish. 600 years earlier the Jewish nation had been conquered by Babylon as punishment for their abandonment of the true God and their worship of false gods. All of the rulers, and most of the wealthy people, were enslaved and taken to Babylon.

Many of them at that time remained faithful. We know of Danial, Esther, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and others who were faithful to our One True God and did not fail to remain true to Him through all sorts of trials. There, many of them started a new life and when they were set free many of them chose not to return to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> These people continued to study the Scriptures and pass the truths and promises to their children, and their children's children, on down through the generations. They would have taught them about the prophecies like our Old Testament reading today in Isaiah 60, or the prophecy in Numbers 24 that mentions a star. They would have taught them all the promises of the One who is to come. ...and they waited.

Then on one late clear night. "Melchior! Come quickly!"

"What is is Caspar? I'm busy drawing my new star charts."

"You need to start over with your charts. Look at what is happening!"

After some explanation from Caspar, Melchior shouts, "Balthazar! Come quickly!"

"Would you two stop shouting!"

"Stop shouting yourself and get up here!" Melchior exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"Look at what Caspar has seen in the Western sky. Look at that star! It is glorious! Magnificent! Astounding! I believe such a thing has never been seen before."

1 [www.BethlehemStar.com](http://www.BethlehemStar.com)

2 Ezra 1:5-6

Balthazar asked, “Could this be the star of the prophecy? Could this be the sign of the Messiah?”

“It must be!” Caspar said, “How could it be any other? Nothing so beautiful has ever been donned by the night sky! It must be the sign of the prophesy. It must be! Gentlemen we must journey back to our homeland. The star leads us that way. We must return. If the Messiah has come we must go to pay our respect and homage to him.”

“I agree.” Melchior stated. “We are compelled to go.”

“There is so much work here,” Balthazar stated, “but you are right. We must go. Gentlemen time is not on our side. We must prepare for the long journey and depart as quickly as possible.”

The three men never slept that night. They were too excited to try. In the morning they each instructed their servants to begin preparing the supplies and to make ready for the long journey ahead of them.

“Gentlemen,” Caspar said, “we cannot go until we know what gifts we are to bring. How should we honor this king?”

Balthazar was the first to answer. “The prophesies tell us many things about him. We know he will be a king, a priest, and we know he will be sacrificed. The Scriptures tell us all these things.”

“I will bring him Gold.” Caspar said, “It is a gift fitting of a new born king.”

“I will bring him Frankincense. This is the gift for a new priest.” said Melchior.

“I will bring the Myrrh.”

“Balthazar, that is a gift for a funeral, not a birth.”

“I know Melchior, but this is no ordinary birth. The Scriptures are clear on this point. This king is born to die. I will bring him Myrrh.”

“It is a wise gift Balthazar.” said Caspar. “A wise gift indeed.”

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The entourage was assembled, the camels loaded, and the journey began. It took months of travel through desert and mountains. As they traveled the star remained before them. Ever leading them westward. Back to their homeland, the Promised Land. The land promised to Abraham and given to God’s people when they came out of Egypt. The land these men had never seen.

They traveled on...

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Caspar spoke, “I have heard that a new king, Herod, is rebuilding the holy city of Jerusalem to some of its former splendor. I am anxious to see the great city of God.”

“As am I. Our journey has been long.” said Melchior.

“Long indeed, but the traders we spoke to yesterday say we are not far off.” Balthazar continued, as they crested a hill, “My good men, look! The holy city. It is Jerusalem. We must

make our way to the palace to visit this new born king.”

The great caravan of camels and servants poured in through the city gates. It didn't take much time for the people to start asking, “Who are these men that have come to see Herod?”

As they moved through the city servants of the wise men asked, “In which great house has your new king been born?” This troubled the people. They had not even heard Herod's wife was pregnant. It took little time for all of Jerusalem to buzz with gossip and wonder about the great caravan that was winding its way through the narrow streets.

Upon arriving at the palace of Herod the usual respects were paid to the sitting king. An audience was requested and since the buzz about the reason for their journey had already reached the palace, they were granted an immediate audience.

“Great king, live forever, we have come to see the new born king. We have seen his star, read the prophecies of him, and we have come to pay homage and worship to him.”

By now all of Jerusalem, and Herod's house with them, were troubled by the unannounced arrival of these men. Herod asked the Temple leaders to examine the old Scriptures and determine where such a king was to be born.

Finally it was found. “The prophet Micah tells us, great king, it is in Bethlehem that the Messiah is to be born.<sup>3</sup>”

“Messiah?!” Shouted Herod, “Who said anything about a Messiah?! I am king in Jerusalem. By the power of all Rome I am king, and king I will remain. Leave me now!”

Herod then secretly sent for the wise men and held a private audience with them. “Our priests say the Scriptures explain the child will be born in Bethlehem. Tell me gentlemen when did this star appear? When was this child born?”

“Several months ago, great king. It was about two years ago that I first saw the star.” Caspar explained. “We made preparations and traveled here immediately.”

“Hmmm. I too would like to worship this child. One must always be obedient to the will of God. Go and search for the child, and when you find him return and tell me so that I too can worship him.”

“It will be done as you have commanded O king.” said Melchior. “By your leave we will travel to Bethlehem now.”

“You have it. Depart at your leisure, but be certain you return to me. Do not leave my land without telling me where this child is living.”

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The wise men assembled the caravan and wound their way back out of the city. “Does it strike any of you as strange that the king did not know of these things when we arrived?” Melchior asked.

“It did.” The other two responded.

They traveled the five miles to Bethlehem and began to ask, “Where is the new king that was born?”

There had been a few children born at that time. They were given directions to this house and that one. Always it was the wrong child. “Are there no more children born in Bethlehem?” Caspar asked.

One woman answered, “There is only one but he is no king. Everyone knows he was not born premature. I think Joseph has political connections. How else could Mary not be punished. The Law is the law.”

“Joseph and Mary?” Caspar asked, “Where do they live?”

“Down the street and left at the end.” the woman said and walked away muttering to herself.

It took some time before they found the home where Joseph and Mary were living. Joseph had set up his shop in the back of the house, but with all the commotion, he had already walked out front to see what excitement was traveling through his small little town.

“Are you the man called Joseph?” Caspar asked.

“I am,” Joseph responded, “but who am I to such great men as you?”

“We have come to worship the new born king. Please, we must see him. We have traveled far to come to this place.”

“Mary, bring Jesus outside.”

Mary came out with little Jesus holding her hand. As the wise men dismounted and unpacked their gifts Mary said to Joseph, “Remember the shepherds Joseph?”

“These are not shepherds Mary.”

“I know, but God is still telling the world about His Son.”

The wise men offered their gifts and told of Scripture’s prophecies concerning the child’s kingship, priesthood, as well as the suffering and death to come. Mary treasured all these things in her heart. The wise men stayed at the inn, the very same inn that two years earlier had no room when Jesus was born. They stayed a few days to rest and prepare for their long journey back.

It was their last night in Bethlehem that they were each visited in a dream by an angel.

“Last night I had the strangest dream Melchior. In my dream an angel came to me and warned that we should not return to Herod, as he commanded us to do.”

“I had that dream as well. Balthazar we’ve both had the strangest dream...”

“I heard you talking. I had the same dream. This is no coincidence. The king may have given his orders to us but God has given His command. We will not return to Herod. We will leave Bethlehem another way.”

With the caravan packed and the servants having made everything ready, they left. Only the inn keeper knew why they had left so secretly in the early evening hours. It would give them a

full night's travel before word could begin to reach Jerusalem about their departure. By the time word got to Herod the caravan was nowhere to be found, and the wise men slipped away into time.

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Epiphany is a word that means discovery or understanding. The wise men had made the discovery of Jesus' star and had traveled a great distance to find and worship Him. They were faithful men who worshiped God and knew their Scriptures. They had found, and knew the Gospel message, which had been recorded and promised by God, long ago. They came to do what we come to do every Sunday. They came to worship the King of all kings, and the Lord of all lords. They came to worship the Messiah, the Son of God.

They knew in their wisdom that men are always required to obey God rather than man when man's orders are in conflict with God's commands. To disobey Herod's orders could have meant death for any or all of them. It was no small thing to leave the land of Herod without being given permission, but these wise men took part in that difficult struggle to protect this little child from every attack and vengeful assault that Satan tried to use to destroy Him.

We should all be so wise, to read our Bible daily, and learn from it. We should all take part in teaching our children, and our children's children, the truths of God. The world will always attack. It is perhaps for us, in this generation, more clear than it has been for others. The world is trying still to remove Christ from the world. The world wants to kill Christianity. The world wants to destroy the truth and replace it with another truth, which is no truth at all. The world wants you to obey its demands rather than God's commands.

The world will one day pass away, but the Word of the Lord will last forever.<sup>4</sup> Be wise men and women of God. Be wise like these men were wise. Hold on to that faith, given to you by God. It will lead you through the trials of this life to another life. A life where we will finally get to meet these wise men. An everlasting life that will most certainly be worth the wait.

Amen.

4 Isaiah 40:8