

We Have Come to Worship Him

1/3/21
Epiphany

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Gospel lesson where we hear these words once again: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him".....and then later in our reading... "..... And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him." (Matthew 2:1-2,11) This is the Word of the Lord.

In the early church, Epiphany was observed even more than Christmas perhaps, that's because, while at Christmas Christ was revealed to the Jews... at Epiphany... Christ was revealed to the Gentiles... and the church rapidly included more Gentiles than Jews. Remember the angels' announcement? It was delivered to the shepherds at Christmas... the Jewish.. shepherds, "I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all.. the.. people," ... in other words, the Jewish people.

But at Epiphany... that good news of great joy was extended to the Gentiles... to non-Jews... and in this case... it was extended to the wise men - the Magi. And so Epiphany... is when Christ was first made known to the nations outside of Israel.

There are several indications as to how we know that the wise men were Gentiles. First... they're called "wise men... from the east." "The east" probably means Persia or Babylon, where royal courts included such educated men... who studied the stars and science - and the lore ...traditions - of other cultures and other fields of learning.

Second... the Magi ask, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" By asking the question in this way... they indicate that they themselves are not Jews. So then... how would these Gentiles have known about a coming "king of the Jews"? Most likely from Jews who had been scattered throughout the Middle East. For example... centuries earlier Daniel had been taken into captivity in Babylon... he even served in the royal court there, working with the Babylonian wise men. Daniel - and other Jews who were dispersed - could have told those Gentiles about the coming Messiah who would bring salvation to all the nations.

And third... the manifestation of the Christ to the Magi fits well with the prophecies of God's salvation coming to the Gentiles. As we heard in our Old Testament lesson, the light that God gives to Israel would attract worshipers from other nations: "For behold... darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And NATIONS shall come to your light. . . . They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news... the praises of the LORD."

So Epiphany then, means that Gentiles get to join in the worship of the true God. And we, beloved... are Gentiles. Our ancestors were those peoples sitting in darkness, until the light of the gospel reached them. Our forefathers worshiped trees and stars and false gods. They had no knowledge that the God who created them... also loved them... and forgave their sins by sending a Savior. But, friends... through the spread of the gospel... through missions... our people received that faith. As St. Paul writes in our Epistle lesson, "... the Gentiles are fellow heirs... members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Epiphany also helps us understand the worship of our God. The first thing that Epiphany shows us... is that the gospel of Jesus Christ turns Gentiles into worshipers of the one true God. In response to the gospel, we Gentile outsiders... come into the household of God... and know him and worship him... as insiders.

The second thing Epiphany shows us about worship... is that it is Christ-centered. The star that the Magi had seen "... went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was."..... "They saw the child . . . and they fell down and worshiped him." The star stopped exactly where the Christ Child was. And where Christ is... worship happens. For us now... it is the sanctuary that is the place where Christ is... where he has promised to be present. Here - in his sanctuary at St John - Christ is present in the midst of his people. In the Word and Sacraments, our Lord Jesus Christ is present with us and for us... gifting us with his forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Worship, brothers and sisters... is Christ-centered. That's why the church's worship life is tied to the life of Christ. The structure of the church year reflects this fact. It begins with Advent - a time of waiting - in hope - for the coming Messiah. At Christmas... we celebrate the birth of Christ – the king of Kings made manifest in human flesh. In the season of Epiphany... Christ manifests his glory to us ... as today we follow the star to Bethlehem... and in the weeks to come we will follow our Lord from his Baptism to his Transfiguration.

During Lent... we go with Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. There, we will follow Him through Holy Week with Christ's Passion... Maundy Thursday... Good Friday - Christ's suffering and death for our forgiveness. Then... Easter... the Resurrection of Our Lord, which means life forever for the baptized. Forty days later, the Ascension of Our Lord to the right hand of God... where he now - presently - rules all things for the sake of his church. At Pentecost... the ascended Lord pours out the Spirit to work during the time of the church. And finally... the church year ends... as we once again look forward... forward to Christ's return, His second advent.

So the church year keeps us close to our Lord. For our life is now hidden with Christ in God. Indeed, friends... Christ is our life. Therefore... worship must be - and delights to be - Christ-centered. And so, like the wise men, "we... have come (this day) to worship him" - Christ Jesus our Lord.

The third thing Epiphany shows us about worship is that it is joyous. When the Magi saw the star, Scripture says, "They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Matthew could have just written, "They rejoiced." He could have simply emphasized it by saying, "They rejoiced with joy." He could have added to that and just said, "They rejoiced with great joy." But Matthew pulls out all the stops: "They rejoiced exceedingly... with great joy." He really piles up the words to describe their extreme joy in seeing the Savior!... Worship - Epiphany worship - is exceedingly joyous.

And so I ask you.. those here in person and those online... do you enjoy worship? Sometimes we lose our joy... we lose it because we see worship as something we have to do...are obligated to do... and not.. get to do... we see it as a burden... an imposition... we see it as something that interferes with what we would rather be doing.

If that is your attitude.... maybe a different way of thinking is in order. Instead of "Do I have to go to church?"... a better way to look at it is: "You mean I get to go to church? Wow... that's great!" To be where Christ is... where he is giving out his gifts - what better place - on all of the earth - could there possibly be? To receive his forgiveness for my sins... to receive his life and Spirit for my life in the world... to be given a sure hope to hold onto - the hope of the resurrection and eternal life - brothers and sisters you can't get that anywhere else!

To be built up in the faith... to be part of God's family - his people - think about it... that's wonderful! What a joy it is - truly is - for us to come here... and worship the Lord!

We can say with the psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” “We have come to worship him” - joyously!

One final thing Epiphany shows us about worship... is that it is sacrificial. We express our joy by giving... giving of ourselves. The wise men gave gifts to Christ in worship: “Opening their treasures, they offered him gifts... gold and frankincense and myrrh.” These were costly gifts... gifts appropriate for one who was the Savior-King. The Magi expressed their adoration... their worship... their thankfulness and joy... by giving sacrificially.

And so do we. Our worship is sacrificial. We give of ourselves - our time, our talents, and our treasures - in our total worship life as Christians. We set aside time to come to church and gather for worship. We give of our talents – whether just singing the hymns as part of the worshiping congregation... whether by serving as an usher or in the altar guild... whether by serving as a congregational officer... or simply in your daily life in acts of love and service - these are all ways to use our talents in the worship of God.

We give of our time, we give of our talents... and... we give of our treasures. Our offerings are expressions of worship just as much as are the singing of hymns. That check or coin, or dollar bill that you put in the offering plate is an expression of not only who you are... but whose you are. It represents the time and work that went into getting it. And in your giving... you are supporting the ministry of the gospel in this place.

And so our worship is sacrificial. Not of course that our sacrifice could merit or earn our acceptance before God. No... only Christ’s sacrifice does that. Our love for God is a response... a response to his love for us... to his free gift of salvation. Even so... God does graciously receive our worship as acceptable .. for Christ’s sake. “We have come... to worship him” - sacrificially.

I’d like to underscore the point about the only sacrifice that makes any of our worship even possible. And the only sacrifice that enables us to come before God... is the sacrifice that Christ made for us on the cross. The one “born... king of the Jews”... grew up to have that title placed over him on a cross of shame. There - Christ Jesus... the wholly innocent one - bore your sins and mine, so that we sinners - now forgiven - can come into God’s presence without being struck down. Christ is the great High Priest who offered the one all-availing sacrifice for sin... by his own most holy blood.

Without Christ, brothers and sisters... there is no worship. Without Christ... without his death and resurrection... we would still be in the dark, not knowing God.

But the good news is, Christ has done all of this... for us... and made us righteous before God ..and through him our worship is acceptable to God. This good news - this gospel - is the star that leads us to Christ. And when we see him - our Savior and King - we too, fall down... and worship him.

Today, as we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord... we have been shown several things about worship. First... Epiphany turns Gentile non-worshippers into worshippers. God shines his light on us, and we are no longer in the dark.

Second... Epiphany worship is Christ-centered... marked by the presence of Christ and tied to the life of Christ... who is.. our life.

Third... Epiphany worship is joyous - exceedingly joyous – it is a privilege and a pleasure to come before Him gathered as a congregation.

And fourth... Epiphany worship is sacrificial... a giving of ourselves. But... this sacrificial worship is simply a response to the only real sacrifice that counts before God... which is... Christ Jesus, the Son of God, giving himself... for us. This is the Epiphany of Our Lord.

And so today.... just like the wise men being led to Jesus... we too, beloved “have come... to worship him.” May you be filled... with exceedingly great joy! This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.