

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We are celebrating the Epiphany of Our Lord today. January 6th is the actual feast. It doesn't garner the attention of most in the media. Many there obsess over the January 6th riots. But some in the media pushed back. One writer's headline began: "Jan. 6 Is Important Because It's Epiphany ..." and he continued: "Don't allow a hysterical media to capture Jan. 6 for their purposes. Let's reclaim it as the glorious celebration of Christ's manifestation" (John Daniel Davidson, "Jan. 6 Is Important Because It's Epiphany, Not The Solemn Anniversary Of A Fake Insurrection," *The Federalist*, January 6, 2023).

The Epiphany of our Lord ought to be a glorious celebration. It is one of the church's feast days, celebrated in the first centuries following Christ. Through the years, you know, some celebrated Christ's birth on January 6th. Some celebrated Christ's baptism. We celebrate the coming of the wise men to the house where Jesus and His mother were residing. All of these are part of Christ showing Himself as "God in man made manifest" (LSB394).

For us, Epiphany signals the end of the season of Christmas and the beginning of the season of Epiphany. But the coming of the wise men has been so incorporated into the narrative of Christ's birth, that we can almost think of it as the thirteenth day of Christmas. Surely the nativity scene you put up in your home, and most nativity scenes, make the visit of the wise men a part of the greater Christmas story.

And truly it is. In Matthew, this account follows his telling of how "*the birth of Jesus Christ*" took place (Matt. 1:18). That account concludes with Mary giving "*birth to a son*" and Joseph calling "*his name Jesus*" (Matt. 1:25). Our Gospel today follows immediately and begins "*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem*" (Matt. 2:1).

Matthew wants us to pay attention to this story. In the Gospel lesson, we hear Matthew say it twice, ἰδοὺ ... "*Behold*" or "*lo*" as the King James Bible translates it. It's a word that is meant to catch our attention and listen up.

In that way, this Epiphany Gospel continues the greater story of Jesus' birth that began really with the angel appearing to Joseph — "*behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream*" (Matt. 1:20). That is, "Pay attention. This is important. Something big is happening to Joseph."

Similarly in Luke, we hear the angel say to Mary: "*behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus*" (Luke 1:31). This time it was to Mary — and it's to us hearers of the word — "Pay attention! God is doing an unusual thing here with this virgin maid; it's big!"

Luke's account climaxes with the appearance of the angel — “[ιδού] *lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them*” and the angel's message — “*Fear not, for [ιδού] behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:9-11). “Behold! Pay attention,” this mighty messenger of the Lord was saying to the shepherds and to us. Pay attention to this glorious good news.”

So today, the glorious good news of Christmas continues with the unexpected coming of wise men to visit King Jesus. Behold, it begins, too. “[*B*]ehold, 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.*”

“Behold!” These wise men had paid attention when others apparently had paid none. They had lifted up their heads as the star rose in the eastern sky, and they realized that this star would lead them to the prophesied “*star [that would] come out of Jacob,*” to the king, the “*scepter [that would] rise out of Israel*” (Num. 24:17). This star would lead them eventually to Jesus.

But not before they made a stop in Jerusalem, after all, that's where you'd think you'd find a king ... in a palace, surrounded by luxury and courtiers attending to the king's every desire. That's where they met dastardly King Herod. Few in history were more ruthless than he. He executed one of the more ambitious of his sons, and you remember he is the one who ordered the slaughter of the baby boys of Bethlehem when the wise men didn't report back to Herod about the Christ child. So despicable was he that even Caesar Augustus once reportedly said, “It is better to be Herod's pig than son” (Wikipedia on the Massacre of the Innocents).

Of course, the wise men didn't find King Jesus dwelling in palatial luxury, and Herod's advisors sent them on to Bethlehem, for the wise men did not come to pay homage to brutal Herod. They came to worship before the “*King, the Lord*” who came to “*judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity*” (Ps. 98:6, 9). They came to worship the child who was born, the son who was given, whose name would be called, “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*” (Isa. 9:6).

For Herod ruled over a land covered with darkness; over people who walked in thick darkness. But this darkness was not just because of Herod's evil ways. This darkness was a result of sin; this darkness engulfed the whole earth. People everywhere groped to find their way in the darkness, but they could not find the way. Sinners cannot find their own way out of darkness.

Like with the wise men, a light was needed; and, in fact, a light came, shining in the darkness, not a star in the sky, but “*the star ... out of Jacob.*” This star was “*the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star*” (Rev. 22:16). And

in the dark night of sin, eyes are drawn to this light. In thick darkness, we pay attention to the light. Shepherds and wise men came to this light. Nations come still to this light, Jews and Gentiles. The mighty and the lowly, kings and servants come to the brightness of His rising. The world “[lifts] up [its] eyes all around and [sees].” People “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9) gather around Him; they flock to His light.

This light, of course, is Jesus Christ, the light no darkness could overcome (John 1:5), not even the thick darkness of our sin, not even the midday darkness of cross and death. We lift up our eyes to this light, to Him who was lifted up. We pay attention to Him who carried the title “king of the Jews” even unto the cross. We rejoice in this only Son of God, who, with gifts more precious than gold and frankincense, gave up His own holy, precious blood unto innocent suffering and death for us men and for our salvation. That’s why we, like the wise men, pay attention to this Star and follow Him.

For behold we are drawn to this Star not by a miraculous star in the sky that comes “to rest over the place where the child was,” but by the metaphorical stars shining in our lives that lead us to Him, namely by Word and Sacrament. We pay attention to “the prophetic word” “as to a lamp shining in a dark place” whereby the Holy Spirit causes the day to dawn and the morning star to rise in our hearts (2 Pet. 1:19). God Himself shines “in our hearts” by Word and Sacrament “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Paying attention to these “unsearchable riches of Christ,” the Spirit brings “to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God,” that Jews and Gentiles together “are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This was God’s “eternal purpose” for us. He accomplished it for us “in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:6, 8-9, 11), our “bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16), and He delivers it to us by the Spirit’s gifts.

Therefore, let your heart “thrill and exult” as you come to Jesus. “Arise, shine, for [behold,] your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.” Pay attention “to the word of life” and hold fast to it, “that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15-16) — or shine like stars, as our LSUS theme goes. It comes from Philipians 2. Mrs. Bahr reminds our students of that daily, and she concludes her daily announcements: “So shine like stars in God’s kingdom. Be a bright spot in the darkness. Have a blessed day.” Looking to Jesus, God grant that we also may “Shine like stars.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.