

## **GOD WAS GOING TO BRING GOOD OUT OF EVIL**

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

Hear again the Word of the Lord for this celebration of the second of five great Christian Feast days held each year:

*And coming into the house, they saw the Child with Mary, the mother of Him; and, having fallen, they worshipped Him; then, having opened their caskets, they placed alongside Him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>1</sup>*

That describes the response of the Magi, those whom many call “Wise Men” or “three Kings,” when they first beheld the Epiphany, or manifestation, or appearance of our Lord. That event, in which those who were not born of Jewish mothers, became, quite early in the life of the Church, one of the regularly celebrated Feasts of Christendom. January 6 was, apparently before AD 216, celebrated to help the faithful remember Jesus’ baptism.<sup>2</sup> (Perhaps you may now understand why we usually celebrate the Baptism of our Lord instead of Epiphany I here on the Sunday which follows the Epiphany Feast). In any event, by the time of Athanasius, around AD 370, tonight’s Feast was celebrated, along with Easter and Pentecost by most Christian congregations.

By the mid-400’s, in the Western Churches from which our confession of the Faith finds its roots, the emphasis of this great Feast had become centered on the journey and offerings of the Magi. That we not be found overly zealous to overturn 15 and a half centuries of Christian Epiphany emphasis in that which is heard in the majority of Christian churches in the world, we will continue on the same journey they have taken. We have heard of the wonders in the stars, and of the guiding of God of men, who, wise in the study of the heavens, were led to follow a wandering star. Our text for this Feast night informs us:

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in (the) days of Herod the king, behold Magi from (the) rising of the stars arrived into Jerusalem...<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:11.

<sup>2</sup> Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, v. 1, 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 2:1.

St. Matthew reports that the Magi came — *from the rising of the stars* — we would say, “from the East,” or, the Orient, likely Persia, the environs of modern day Iran. Following the caravan routes of the day — for no one would have crossed directly across the arid regions south and west of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers unless he absolutely was driven there — the Wise Men may have covered more than 1,100 miles to reach Jerusalem. If they were really aggressive in driving their pack animals, they might have been able to reach Jerusalem in about a month. We do not know what date the star appeared, nor when the Magi left their homelands.

In any event, following a star that moved, they arrived in Judea, and went to the place where a newborn king would be expected to reside, King Herod’s palace. (The ancients took great stock in the concept that stars and other celestial events heralded the birth of great men). What the star was comprised of, how it moved and halted, we are not told. What we know is that men known for their studies of the heavenly realms recognized and went after a special sign and stopped in Jerusalem. How many of them visited Herod that day, and Jesus later on, is not known.

Over the centuries, the Church began to teach that there were three. This appears to have begun with the first written icons. These painted images early in Church history depicted three men, one old, one middle aged and one young. They presented the fact that Jesus came for all generations. Later, over the centuries, these men were given names, Melchior (or Melkon), Gaspar, and Balthasar . By the fourteenth century AD, those names were respectively attached to kings of Persia, India and Arabia.

That is enough for this year concerning Church legends. They have been served their purposes, to try to impress in the minds of the faithful the reality that three gifts were given, that wise men sought our Lord and that He came for all nations. What we do know is this, more than one wise man came to Herod,

*continually saying, "Where is the One having been birthed the King of the Jews? For we saw the star of Him in the rising of the stars and we came to give worship to Him."<sup>4</sup>*

They stated they had witnessed the wonders in the heavens. They had traveled into the ancient Holy City, Old Jerusalem following a star that moved, halted and moved again. That was where King Herod the Great ruled from 37- 4 BC. With that, the Holy Spirit has again led St. Matthew to give a "time-stamp" to the arrival of the Magi. Their repeated questioning produced a reaction in the aging King,

*Hearing, the King Herod was shaken together and all Jerusalem with him.<sup>5</sup>*

Herod was a fairly typical ruler of that era, in that locale. He was brutal by our standards. He was also very concerned to ensure his dynastic rule continued after his death. He wrote at least five wills to ensure right succession.

Now, he did not simply tear them up or strike through the names of heirs who angered him. The last two wills were changed because Herod had discovered plots by his sons, from his first two wives, to seize power either before or after his death. In 7 B.C., a year or so before Jesus' birth, Herod ordered sons Alexander and Aristobulus executed, likely by strangling, for attempting to become rulers before Herod died. He was a suspicious man, and knew that he had no little son to take his rule. In fact, in 4 B.C., the latest year Jesus could have been born, just five days before Herod's death, he had another son, Antipater, executed.

So, this paranoid killer of his own sons was stirred up by the questioning of the Magi. It is no surprise that the people of Jerusalem, hearing of his being shaken by the news of a new King, would also be trembling. Herod was known to take his wrath out on others. Herod would not give up any fight quietly, in particular when it came to royal succession. So, he plotted to ensure that his will, and not the will of this "King of the Jews" Whom he did not know, would take place, as our text continues,

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 2:2.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 2:3.

*And he gathered together all the High Priests and scribes of the people, continually inquiring from them where the Christ (was) to be birthed.<sup>6</sup>*

Herod had not been able to rule the stubborn Jews for over 30 years as king, and 10 before that as governor, without having some good degree of intellect. Since the star-gazers were asking for one born King of the Jews, he turned to those who should know such details. Herod himself had been choosing the Jewish High Priests. There could have been up to four of them hanging around. The scribes could have come from the priestly class, the Sadducees, or the lay authorities, the Pharisees. All of them had to be older than 40. All of them had the written Word of God.

Those men, called upon by a wrathful king, gave the safe answer. They quoted Scripture. They drew the King to texts from Micah (5:1-3), II Samuel (5:2) and I Chronicles (11:2). Evidently that was good enough for Herod, for he *secretly called the Magi; he worked to know exactly from them the time of the appearing star.*<sup>7</sup>

Now, as you have learned, King Herod was not “passive-aggressive.” He was simply a crafty aggressive killer of all who would stand in his way. Yet, Herod’s rule in Judea over the last 10 years before the Magi appeared had been marked with his suppressing many revolts and killing not a few revolutionaries. He willed to trick the Magi into doing his searching for him. This would stir up little public concern, at least not so much as him sending a contingent of troops to find the Child.

Now, out of all of this, the Magi actually benefitted. In Jerusalem they would have been exposed to the Good News that the Messiah, the Christ, was to have been born in Bethlehem. The King had consulted the religious leaders and had determined to send the Magi to the town called, *little among the thousands of Judah.*<sup>8</sup> They would have heard that the one they were seeking would shepherd the people of Israel, the people of God, just from the answers given to Herod. So, off they went, having been equipped then with the Word of God. The Word gave them light to lighten the Gentiles! God was going to

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 2:4.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 2:7.

<sup>8</sup> Micah 5:2.

bring good – for the Magi, and from them, for many peoples – out of King Herod’s evil intentions. Just so does God still do in our world today. Our text continues:

*And they, hearing the king, proceeded on their way; and, behold! the star which one they saw in the rising of the stars, it went before them, until coming, it stood above where the Child was.<sup>9</sup>*

What had happened to the star while King Herod’s research was going on? Our text does not say. It appears that it had stopped moving when the Wise Men reached Jerusalem. It may have stopped shining. Now, as they were sent on their way, it appeared again. It guided them about six miles to Bethlehem. There it stood still.

What is significant about this part of the text is not only the control God exercised over the star and the good He was bringing out of the king’s evil intentions. What you may learn is that where the Word is, even if it is among those who are leaders and teachers of the Church, faith may be absent. There is absolutely no record that the high priests and scribes made any attempt to accompany the Wise Men. They gave the king the information, the Word of God he desired, and they let the Magi depart.

If they actually believed the Word they had spoken, wouldn’t they have gone along? After all, they, as Israelites, had been waiting for centuries for the Word that the promised Shepherd was born in Bethlehem. They could look up into the sky and see the same star which the Magi followed. There is no indication that it was a “magic star,” visible only to the Magi.

No, those who were given charge of the Word did not believe it when it was happening in their midst. They did not desire the Promise to be fulfilled. They are proof that there can be, and are, unbelievers in the Visible Church in all ages. The Word of God given to bring light to the faithful was given, but they extinguished the light in themselves through unbelief. This is what people do when they become complacent in their faith, when they stop believing God’s Word and promises.

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<sup>9</sup> *Matthew 2:9*

Yet, God has declared that His Word will not return void. Even in the face of the faithlessness of the High Priests, scribes and king Herod, the Word would work faith. Our text continues:

*Then, beholding the star, they rejoiced (with) very great joy!<sup>10</sup>*

That was the reaction of the Magi. The text builds on their rejoicing, piling joy upon joy. For, now they had the Word, and the light, and it was leading them on to the very spot where the King of the Jews was staying. Their long journey had come to an end. They had arrived at their destination. Our text continues:

*And coming into the house, they saw the Child with Mary, the mother of Him; and, having fallen, they worshipped Him; then, having opened their caskets, they placed alongside Him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>11</sup>*

As was briefly mentioned this past Sunday, the Holy Family had already moved from keeping Jesus in a feed-trough into a house in Bethlehem. To reflect that tonight, the banner on the North is to be seen as giving way to the banner on the South.

So, the Magi had reached their goal! They had already received the gift of the Faith through the Light of the Word of God. They beheld the Christ Child with His Mother, and what did they do? They fell down in worship before Him. Just as you do in His Presence in the Lord's Supper, they showed their respect for His coming.

Then, having received joy and light in His Presence, they responded to His Presence by giving Him gifts. Their treasures we have heard about in past years, and will likely again hear about them in future years. Let it stand for this year that their gifts show that the Faith produces a response in the faithful. Yet, in those who reject the Word, no evidence of the Faith comes forth. In which group in the Church shall you be found in in this New Year of our Lord? The Light of Life has come to you, the Bright and Morning Star is here. Come, and recline in His Presence.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:10.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 2:11.

Epiphany Feast (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 24; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

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***Soli Deo Gloria***