

Lesson, Gospel & Sermon for Epiphany of our Lord-January 6th, 2019 Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

FIRST LESSON: Ephesians 3:1-12

¹This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.



GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Promises Given to Peculiar People”

Sermon by Vicar Randall J. Questad

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

On October 31, 2017 we celebrated the 500th anniversary of what marked the beginning of the Reformation when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the Wittenberg Cathedral. Then this past year on August 12th, 2018 we celebrated a significant milestone in our own church heritage as we commemorated the 150th anniversary when the first Nidaros church was chartered with a joint worship of the four churches that emerged from that beginning. But today, January 6th, 2019 is a special day as well. There of course always is a January 6th every year, but it does not very often fall on a Sunday. In fact it won't happen again the year 2030. So in 2030, I will be.....well older.

Today is the actual day of the Epiphany of our Lord which always happens on January 6th. This day is one of the oldest of festivals in the church year. It has been celebrated since at least the 2nd century. It always occurs on this day because it is 12 days after Christmas. This day marks the end of the Christmas Season and marks the beginning of when Jesus reveals himself in this season of Epiphany.

We can thank our youth and the Sunday School Christmas programs for reminding us about one of the events that happens during this season of Epiphany. The first event in this season tells of how Jesus is revealed to the wise men as we just heard from the gospel of Matthew. Then next week you will hear of the next major event that happens during this season of the church year and that is when Jesus is revealed as the Son of God when John the Baptist baptizes him in the Jordan River.

But the scripture from Matthew which tells of what we often call the journey of the wiseman is not preached about very often since January 6th rarely occurs on a Sunday. In many Eastern countries however January 6th is still as important as a national holiday as the fourth of July is to us in the United States. Schools and businesses are often closed for the day. In Spain, this day is also known as “Three Kings Day” and on the night of the 5th of January children write letters to the three kings rather than Santa Claus and ask them for presents and leave these notes in their polished shoes along with sweet treats and milk and wine. You can only imagine who makes sure the wine is gone before morning to prove to the children the three kings had indeed visited the house. It also has been a tradition for some to take down their Christmas trees on this day and burn them as a sign that Jesus is revealed by the bright light of the fire.

But Epiphany is an important day for us as well. In this story of the wise men, we learn of who and how and to what measures God chooses to reveal his son Jesus to show us that he is the light of the world. There are some speculations that go along with this Sunday in Epiphany that we now seem to have accepted as truth. First of all we seem to have accepted the idea that there were three people that delivered the gifts to the Christ child. From scripture we only learn that three gifts were delivered, but nothing is mentioned about the number of wise men. This speculation has even gone to the point that some biblical historians believe they knew who these wise men were and are given the names of Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. And as you know, the wise men themselves are described in different ways. The hymn of the day that we will sing next is not about wise men, but rather “We three Kings”. These wise men and kings have also been described as priests, but likely the most accurate description of these gift deliverers regardless of the number of them would be “magi” from which our word magic and magicians comes from.

And this gets to the heart of the message of Epiphany--who and how God chooses to reveal Jesus to. The ones who brought these gifts most likely were people who practiced magic. They were not royal kings or temple priests or scholarly wise men that were skilled in the scriptures. They were star gazers. They were likely fortune tellers who told others their future by their interpretation of the alignment of stars in the sky. The magi are people who would have used Ouija boards if they had been invented. They were the type of people I teach the confirmation students to stay clear of, because these are the people who break the second commandment by taking the Lord's name in vain by using his name superstitiously.

But God does not place limits of who and how the good news of Jesus is revealed. God chose to use a star, a sign the magi understood to draw them to Jesus. But that of course is not the end to this story. It was God who placed the star in the sky for these people to see. And it was God who made this star to move so that these magi landed first in Jerusalem where they met King Herod who had not learned about the new king from following a star, but from scripture where it told that from the tribe of Judah would come not the least of the rulers and this ruler would shepherd my people Israel. Then King Herod told these magi to continue to follow the star and let him know where this child was so that he too could worship him.

The star continued to guide the magi and it stopped over the manger. The magi delivered their gifts of gold--a gift fit for a king, frankincense--a gift used in worship, and myrrh--a spice used for embalming the dead. It was fortune telling, horoscope writing, star gazers who were led to Jesus and when he was revealed to them, they could do nothing else but bow down and worship him. And then after encountering Jesus, these magi for their country by another road. The magi were no longer the same.

A similar thing happened to the Apostle Paul. In the second reading for today, we heard how Jesus was revealed to Paul also with a bright light. This powerful light blinded him for three days. Paul, first known as Saul had been persecuting Christians, but for some peculiar reason God chose to reveal himself. Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher because Jesus chose to reveal himself to this unlikely person in this peculiar way.

Jesus breaks into the lives of what we would consider unlikely people in peculiar ways. He sometimes guides people to himself with unmistakable signs like the star that guided the magi to the manger. He sometimes uses even more powerful signs that crash into our lives like lightning bolts that stop us in our tracks. He sometimes uses even uses dimly flickering candles to constantly remind us that he is with us even in the darkest of times.

You are here today because Jesus the light of the world has shown his light on you and has drawn you to this place to hear his word of hope, peace, love and joy. Jesus shows up in the most peculiar ways to deliver promises to his chosen people. And for that we like the magi bow down and worship the king who is again revealed to you this day. Amen.