

How Far to Meet the Rising Son?
Matthew 2:1-12
The Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord
January 6, 2019

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

Our text, “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.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

How far will you go to lay hold of the Christ? In a land in which convenience is king, and in a valley and town that has dozens of churches, Lutherans nevertheless find themselves driving great distances on a Sunday morning. In our own congregation, you know that to be true – from Arlington Heights and Cary and Batavia/Aurora and Burlington/Genoa and Rockford. But, we can all sinfully take pride in that and say that says something great about the church rather than it saying something great about the church’s *Christ*. If it says something about the church, then wouldn’t it put a cap on how far you’d be willing to go? Yeah, a 40-minute drive might be worth it, but would a 4-hour drive be worth it? But, if it says something about the *Christ*, then – to receive *Him* – would you not go as far as the wisemen, if needed?

Or, let’s consider it another way: how far would you go in Christian love? Would you bear with one another? Be patient

towards your fellow Christian? Be tender-hearted toward others who might outwardly seem stubborn, but inwardly are weak? Bear with things – or even people – you don’t like? If the great lengths to which you are willing to go says something about the church, you’d put a limit on it, wouldn’t you? A 40-minute drive may not seem bad when all is well within your congregation, but what about when we experience the imperfection of our congregation? But, if the focus and hope of the church’s ‘great lengths to go and great burdens to carry’ is *Christ and His promises*, then “not seven times, but seventy-seven times”, Peter is told.

When we consider the distance the magi traveled, we ought not consider it only in terms of miles... nor ought we think it says something great about the magi. Rather, it says something great about the Christ and says that everything – and everyone – depends upon and ought be seen through the lens of this Christ.

The text says that the magi came *from the east* to see the Christ child. That’s a translation that is very correct, but the actual Greek word can paint a ‘bigger picture’ (more ‘theological’ picture, if you will) than simply speaking of geographic locations and directions. The Greek word for “east” means literally “the rising of the sun”... so the magi came *from* the direction of the rising of the sun. But consider what that says of this Christ – that the *true* light of the world, “the light that enlightens everyone,” St Johan says, the divine light of the world, shines not by heading and looking *to* the east, but

comes so that the magi turn their back on the east, turn their back from the *earth's* great light and follow a better star in the opposite direction... to a better sun, the only Son from heaven. They come *from* the rising of the sun that warms the world *to* the coming of the Son who saves the world.

Indeed, the whole world and universe— even the sun rising from the east – the whole universe is to fix its eyes on this Christ. And so, “from east to west, from shore to shore” the Christmas hymn says it, for “the people sitting in great darkness have seen a great light, on them a great light has dawned”... but dawned not from the *east*, but from the bodily temple of the virgin and the throne of the manger.

And because the dawning of this light is so earth-shattering, so universe-refocusing, Herod is troubled... what will become of his crown and his kingdom? And all of Jerusalem is troubled with him... what will become of their normal course of life if something so history-jarring has come to pass? We sinners sympathize, though none of us would ever like to be numbered alongside Herod... nevertheless, our sentiments are similar.

We say, “Yes, the Scriptures say he will be born in Bethlehem of Judah, and yes, we become comfortable with that prophecy and sentimental toward hearing it... but what if it actually comes to pass and threatens the comfortable nature of my normal routine? Of course I *want* a Christ, but I don't want him to topple the kingdoms

I've established for myself; I don't want him to affect and impact the weekly habits and daily life I'm pretty comfortable having with and among family and friends."

But, if your daily life was planned around the rising of the sun and *its* governance over daily routines and schedules and plans, then how much moreso with this better sun, not from the east but drawing all attention away from the sun of the east because of His better light, His greater brilliance. Doesn't this Christ child now demand by His brilliance our constant attention, so that He now governs over our daily routines and schedules and plans among family and friends? Again, the question: How far are you willing to travel, how far in Christian love and piety/devotion and the definition of life, when all of life is defined by this Son from heaven?

And by the way, we *cannot* say that any offense we take is limited to Jesus' role as King... that as long as he is not King, he can still be my Christ. What does the text say of Herod? Not that he was just threatened by the notion of a new king, but that he schemed with chief priests and scribes and "inquired of them where the *Christ* was to be born." Herod was offended that the promises of the Lord's Messiah could actually be true and actually impact daily life. Isn't that the offense taken by Old Adam within each of us... that the promises of the Lord's Messiah are not merely a pious story to acknowledge on Sunday and when everyone is on best behavior, but that the news of the Messiah come to save us, to forgive us, and to

call us to forgive one another could actually be true in history and actually impact daily life. Yes, what if we actually have to say that Genesis 1, 2, and 3 and everything thereafter are not just pious religious stories, but actually impact our reality? – that sin is real; God’s judgment is real; His Christ and plans of salvation are real!

But the magi are not merely *resigned* to this truth, but *rejoice* in it... that the king of the Jews may also be worshipped by the gentiles. And, anyone who’s studied the liturgy with me long enough has heard me talk about this word for worship – *proskyneo* – to beg like a dog and kiss the ring of the master... the magi rejoiced that they could beg of the Lord’s Christ, that He came for them just as much for the Jews.

And that’s true for you, too. The promises of the Old Covenant now fulfilled in the child, the promises of God made manifest in the flesh and blood of this Christ... they are for you, too – not just sentimentally, not just for you to feel better about your lot in life... they are for you, too, as a matter of historical occurrence, as a matter of present divine service from above to sustain and govern your daily life, as a matter of eternal inheritance and certain promises that burst the shadows of death with a brilliance unmatched by earth’s warmest light. Yes, daylight breaks from the east and the cemeteries remain full; but the *Son* has risen so that one day all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.

And that means that, in the meantime, we gentiles ought not return to the selfish and greedy self-protectionism of Herod, but rather we ought realize and confess what the rising of a new sun does to our daily life and our eternal hope... in matters of daily governance and in matters of gifts divine.

This morning, we get a hint of what Christ governing daily life is like. You who in a few minutes come forward to volunteer your time and talents to serve this congregation for the calendar year to come, you will be asked to commit yourself to being governed by *Christ* – not governed by personal interests and personal desires and personal goals, but by Christian love and fidelity and patience and dependence on Christ. And you who remain in the pews and vow to pray for these volunteers will be asked to judge their efforts not by your personal interests and personal desires and personal goals, but by Christian love and fidelity and patience and dependence on Christ. And, frankly, if such a relationship was only based on Calvary Lutheran Church, how far would we really go for it? Would we not only individually go so far as what we're individually *gaining* from it? But, if such a relationship is governed by and dependent on Christ, then won't daily life with one another be governed by repentance and forgiveness and patience and long-suffering and pointing one another to Christ and His gifts divine... "faith in God, fervent love for one another."

And for those gifts divine, we will drive from afar, will we not?, we will bear much, will we not?, to receive this Christ – whose throne of a manger has given way to a common house not just in Bethlehem, but in Elgin. Yes, for all the brilliance of money spent and hours toiled, our house of worship is a common house of wood and tile and shiny metal... until *Christ* enters it each Lord's Day, each time He graciously gathers us gentiles at the foot of His pulpit and altar... and then, this common house and what is given here is heaven on earth, brilliance and light to shatter earth's darkness, Christ in the flesh being adored by those who bear gifts... He *not refusing* your worship, but *eliciting* and *evoking* it by His Holiness and with far greater gifts and service to you than you could ever render to Him. For here, before pulpit and altar, here in the Word and the Sacrament, we gentiles have the inheritance of God's people; here, we share in the benefits of the cross, here we *live* and here we will *die* and from here we will be *buried* with the certain promises of God carrying us to the sunlight of Christ and His eternal day.

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
 Calvary Lutheran Church
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