

Sunday, January 6, 2019 – Epiphany
“Star of Wonder”

Matthew 2: 1-12

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Story Interrupted Structure

Adapted from CPR

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

Matthew begins: “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in 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’ ” (vv 1–2).

Who were these “Wise Men”? Scripture doesn’t call them kings, even though our “star of wonder, star of night” song does. It doesn’t say there were three, even though our song says that too. We picture that number because of the three gifts brought to the Christ Child. By calling them “Wise Men,” I don’t mean they had answers to everything. They did thirst to become wise; they spent time reflecting on world events. Maybe they were stargazers, astrologers, men who tried to understand human events by watching the sky.

Another thing about these Wise Men: They were far away from God’s kingdom. They likely lived hundreds of miles to the east of the Holy Land. They probably had little training in the Bible. Apparently they’d heard about how the Jews longed for a Messiah—perhaps from Numbers 24:17, a prophecy of a king and a star—but possibly they didn’t know too much more than that.

Now watch them! The Lord showed them a special star in the east. Maybe they didn’t know much. Maybe the details weren’t clear. Though there were unanswered questions, they didn’t just sit there. They set out on an expensive, months long trip, so eager to be close to the one born king of the Jews. Even after they had passed through Jerusalem, when they saw the star again on the final leg of their trip, they—if I may paraphrase the old Greek Bible—“rejoiced with a whopping big joy” (v 10)!

Wow! This stands out in the long story of the Bible. Wise Men, far from the kingdom, perhaps with little of God’s Word, receiving a bit of prompting and the sight of a star, make it into “Priority No. 1” to get close to the newborn king. “And going into the house, they saw the child

with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him”—fell down in wonder! “Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (v 11).

Yet, the star that was such glad news to these pagans from the east turned out to be upsetting news for Jerusalem. Matthew says, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (v 3)? You’ve heard of the Herods. Once one of the Herods massacred a crowd of people on the street just because he overheard some of them sympathizing with other victims he had already killed. When Herod heard of this star, he didn’t think of God’s promised Savior, the salvation of his soul, and what a good thing this would be for his people - this was a threat that must be put down, with force.

So Herod schemes – “Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him’ ” (vv 7–8). He summons the Wise Men, not openly, but secretly, to calculate when the star appeared. He sends them off to Bethlehem to check this out. He lies about his intentions. He makes it sound as if he wanted to go himself to kneel before this Child. But murder was in his heart the whole time.

Herod wasn’t alone in being upset by the star. Hear it again, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (v 3, emphasis added). People were understandably upset. Herod might go on a rampage. When his sword starts swinging, no telling who could be cut down! Jerusalem’s chief wonder at the star was whether they’d be collateral damage. You can surely understand why they’re upset.

When Herod convenes the Bible scholars and asks where the king was to be born, these spiritual leaders had an opportunity! They knew it was predicted for Bethlehem, just six miles down the road. They could have said, “Brothers and sisters, this is what we’ve waited for! Let’s hurry along with these Wise Men! They’ve come hundreds of miles; surely we can walk the last six with them!”

But no! These people who know Scripture and are totally familiar with God’s promises take little interest. No excitement. No awe. No wonderment. They don’t encourage other people either. Let’s just sit tight! Let’s hope it blows over!

There you see it: a group of born pagans who know little of the true God drop everything and undertake a grueling journey to get close to the newborn king. Meanwhile, God's own chosen people with years of Bible teaching, living just a nice walk down the road from Bethlehem, sit there. They don't seem interested in what the Lord of mercy has placed in their own neighborhood.

God's still going to get His way. Even if Herod plotted and snuffed out the lives of many baby boys in Bethlehem in his attempt to kill Jesus, God got his way. He shielded his Son. He moved His kingdom forward. He could do that with Herod's help or without it, with a joyous welcome from Jerusalem his people or without it. If He had to do it without Herod, His religious intelligentsia, His people, then Herod and Jerusalem would end up being the losers.

That's our lesson today, too. The star makes a point: God will get His way with you or without you. He can do that. If He has to do it without you, you're the one left behind, who stands on the outside looking in. The Epiphany star asks you a clear question: Is it a star of wonder for you? How are you responding to this Christ, the great Christmas gift from God? In wonderment, faith, and joy... or not?

In many ways, we're not always so different from those Jerusalem people. You've had incredible spiritual blessings here, years of gathering around God's Word. But you and I have the old sinful nature working down inside us. We're not really better than the Jerusalem residents who didn't care much when the Wise Men arrived all excited about the newborn king. We can reach the sad point where we shrug off the urgency of drawing near to the Christ Child because, after all, "we already know that stuff!"

We've just crossed into a new year – which reminds us that time is ticking away. You're coming that much closer to the end of all things, or to the end of your personal life, whichever comes first. Perhaps this is the last new year you'll celebrate before Christ comes. Maybe 2019 is the final January I get to proclaim this good news before the Lord takes me home.

How do you plan to spend 2019 in your life as God's child? The Wise Men had to travel hundreds of miles to get to Christ. You don't have to do anything like that. You've got Bethlehem right here in our church, whenever the saving news of Jesus is sounded. Whenever the Sacraments are offered as Jesus gave them to us, there you have the Christ Child; there he is,

giving himself and the free pardon for the sins of many years. They are all covered over and blotted out of God's memory by the blood of your Savior, Jesus, shed on the cross. What a wonder!

The Wise Men make us blush a little, don't they? To see what a privilege it is to drop everything else and get to where the newborn king lies. God, you just gave us one more Christmas to hear the news flash from Bethlehem! You gave us this new year of grace, a slate wiped clean by your pardon, this wonderful time when we can give ourselves back to you who gave so much to us! God, take hold of us! Set us down in heart and spirit so we don't rest until we get close to this holy Child, so that we take our place right where we belong, on our knees in wonder, next to the Wise Men who rejoiced before him with their great joy! That's the way to respond to the "star of wonder, star of night." May the days of 2019—as many as you get—find you doing just that! In Jesus' name, Amen.