

“Behold the Star”

Today we begin the Season of Epiphany – a season of light. The world in which we live lies in deep darkness, and it seems to grow darker by the day – but the Lord, by His Word, shines His light into our world, revealing to us that which is hidden.

Such a light arises and shines on certain “magi from the east.” What this star was, and how they knew that it revealed the birth of the “king of the Jews” we do not know. Was it the “Christmas star” recently seen in the sky – the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn – which, in my humble opinion, really didn’t seem like much.

Some have speculated that these magi were descendants of those who heard the Word of the Lord in the days of Daniel, when he and other Israelites were taken into exile in the east, to Babylon. Perhaps they associated this star with the promise in Numbers 24:17 which says – “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall arise out of Israel.”

Regardless of all the speculation – God’s Word, this Epiphany Word that reveals His truth – tells us that they came to Jerusalem looking for this One “born king of the Jews.” But He’s not there, is He? He’s in Bethlehem.

So, what happened with the Star – did it take a wrong turn somewhere – or did these magi stop following it at some point in time? God’s Word simply says that the magi had seen the Star “when it rose” or “in the east” – and that the magi came to Jerusalem. God’s Word doesn’t say that the Star led them to Jerusalem – only that it alerted them that “the king of the Jews” had been born.

The magi come to Jerusalem, led by their own reason and strength. They came to Jerusalem because that was where the palace and Temple were located – that is the place of kings and worship – and so, they assumed, that is where they would find the newborn King.

Folks, if left to ourselves – we end up in the same place, lost. Our reason would have us look for this King in places worthy of a king. Our reason would look for this King to operate like the other kings of this world – with treaties and compromise, with warfare and oppression – sacrificing others for the welfare of the kingdom.

But that's not how it is with this King. That is not how God in the flesh Jesus works. That is not what His kingdom is all about. But like the magi – we would not know this – unless God shines His light, revealing Himself, and His truth, to us.

The magi end up in Jerusalem because of the navigation of their own reason – and yet, the Lord is at work – bringing them to Jerusalem so that they might hear His Word. When asked where “the Christ” was to be born – the chief priests and scribes didn't have to go research the question – they immediately respond with the Word of the Lord from the prophet Micah: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

It's only by hearing the Word of the Lord that they know where to find the Christ Child. They are on their way to Bethlehem, when “behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.”

In the same way, the Lord must reveal the Savior to us – because our reason, limited and corrupted by sin, would lead us stray. But God, by His Word, leads us to the house where the King of kings who rules and reigns over all things is to be found.

That's why we confess in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

And what He does for each believer, the Holy Spirit does for the entire Church – leading us to the Christ – so that we might daily and richly be showered with His forgiveness – and live and reign with Him for all eternity.

“And going into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshipped Him.” What a picture of the entire Church – falling down before Jesus with the greatest of reverence – because they know and believe that they are in the presence of the one, true God.

“Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts” – gifts that reveal what they believe concerning this Child. They give Him gold – for He is a king – even though reason says “don’t do that, He’ll only put it in his mouth or toss it around like a ball.”

They give Him frankincense – and reason wonders, “what’s a child going to do with that?” But frankincense was burned on the altar of incense in the Temple – a fragrant smell to accompany the prayers of God’s people – which are pleasing to God. This Child is their Priest, their Intercessor – through whom the prayers of the Church are pleasing to the Father in heaven.

They give Him myrrh – an odd gift for sure – because it was used to embalm dead bodies. What a confession the Church gives with Her gift of myrrh – confessing that this Savior born for us in Bethlehem – will die for us on Calvary – to save His people from their sins.

This day, the Lord has once again led us to the Savior Jesus – called, gathered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit – revealing the God who makes His dwelling with us.

Bethlehem means “the house of bread” – but here in Eagle, at Immanuel, is a Bethlehem “for you.” Here you fall down before the Christ – and He feeds you with “Bread from heaven.” Your eyes see nothing but simple bread and wine – and your reason asks, “How can they do such great things?” But the Light of Christ’s Word shines into your darkness, revealing this wondrous mystery. “This is my Body ... this is my Blood ... given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of all your sins.”

Our gifts confess what we believe – but it is HIS gifts that are cause for celebration. True worship is to receive what Christ promises and offers – and with His Body and blood, conceived in Mary’s womb, nailed to a cross on Calvary, placed into a tomb, only to be raised to life again on the third day – now given into your mouth, He gives you His very own life and salvation.

Enlightened with His gifts – the greatest treasures in heaven and earth – we depart to our own country by another way. We depart in peace – and in the light of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.