

## "What Epiphany Is Really About"

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

1/6/2019

You ever notice that oral history often becomes overblown and exaggerated over time, to the point even that what gets reported in later years often bears little resemblance to what actually happened? I was reminded of that just last week, as I was talking with my son about basketball. I forget now how we got on it, but I was telling him about a player from Plymouth named Scott Skiles, who hit a buzzer-beating shot to force overtime in the 1982 State Finals. I told Chris that that shot was from just inside the hash, which would've made it a good 30-35 feet or so, and that a defender had a hand in his face. But when I went and looked at it again on YouTube last week, I found that wasn't the case. There was no hand in Skiles' face - he was open, and the shot was more like 18-20 feet, just a normal 3-pt. shot today, maybe not even that. It was a very makeable shot - clutch, but makeable. Now I don't know how I could report that to Chris so inaccurately, but in my mind's-eye over time it became different, more fantastic, than it actually was. The significance of the moment overpowered my recollection of its details.

I think the same thing has happened over the centuries with regard to the Epiphany of our Lord. Because of its significance, some of its details are often related and understood differently from the way the Bible relates them. Which is what we want to consider today - we want to reconsider what the Bible actually says about Epiphany, what really happened and what it's really about.

We begin with the wise men, who St. Matthew says came from the east to worship the very young Christ-Child, having followed the leading of a star (Matthew 2: 1-2). According to the popular, more familiar version of the story, Jesus was an infant when the wise men arrived to worship Him (look at any manger scene and you'll see it portrayed that way). But Jesus was NOT an infant when the wise men arrived. As Matthew tells us today, after they left King Herod with instructions to search for Jesus in Bethlehem:

"... they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was."(v.9)

And also:

"After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him."(v.11 a)

Note that the word Matthew uses there to describe Jesus is not "infant" or "baby," but rather "child," showing that Jesus had grown a little, possibly as much as 2 yrs. even, before the arrival of the wise men. We know that is the case because of what Matthew relates in the next narrative of his Gospel, telling us that Herod tried to kill Jesus by slaughtering all the male boys in the region of Bethlehem who were up to 2 years of age, which was the age Herod thought Jesus may have been. Note also that the wise men found Jesus in a house, which means that He was no longer in a manger in a stable.

Most people think that Epiphany was part of the Christmas story, like it was some sort of adjunct to it. But Matthew writes today that the visit of the wise men took place "after Jesus was born" (v.1). Contrary to what is often thought, the Epiphany event of the wise men's visit really isn't about Jesus' birth at all.

And what about those wise men? Many think of them as having been kings of some kind ("We Three Kings of Orient Are," and all that), but we know that, whatever they were, they were NOT kings. But if they weren't kings, what were they? Most would say they were wise men, with our Lectionary today even providing us with that translation of the 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, ... "(v.1)

But this also appears to be at least a little 'bit removed from the truth, as recent scholarship has made clear.

You see, in the original the word is actually "magi," and in the literature of that period magi were NOT typically referred to as being wise - not in spiritual matters, anyway. They were servants of pagan kings, learned in the dark arts; they worshiped false gods. In fact, in the Bible there are only two other instances where magi are mentioned: Daniel 2 & Acts 13, and neither one of those are favorable mentions. In Daniel 2, they are listed alongside wizards and sorcerers (see v.2), those who are UNable to interpret the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar (in contrast to Daniel, by the way, who could); and Acts 13 is the story of Elymas the magician (the term used for him is "magos" - the singular of magi), who tries to thwart Paul and his mission.

Even in the story of their worship of Jesus in Matthew 2, they seem a 'bit naive in their response to king Herod. Everybody knew Herod was wicked; he had a lust for power that was feared by all, and he would do anything to preserve his throne. He even killed two of his sons whom he feared were plotting against him, and when he grew jealous of his wife: Mariamne, he killed her too. Everybody knew that Herod was not a nice man, and yet the magi needed a warning from God in a dream not to return to him.

As for the gifts they gave Jesus, while no doubt sincere in their intention, the magi' s gifts show a misunderstanding of what kind of King Jesus would be. Jesus would be a humble King, showing disdain for earthly wealth and opulence. Jesus even says of Himself later in Matthew:

"Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."(8:20)

The magi's gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were gifts fit for a king, but they were also very costly and extravagant. They were hardly gifts fit for a servant, which Jesus certainly was.

And so, while the magi certainly showed devotion to Jesus, reverencing Him and giving Him kingly gifts, it is clear they did NOT yet understand what kind of a king Jesus would be. They didn't understand that Jesus would one day reign from a cross, dying for their sins and ours. For Matthew, the magi were NOT wise men. Given the popularity of the slogan: "Wise men still seek Him," it would seem that here we have yet another example of people's common understanding of Epiphany not being in-line with what Epiphany is about.

We too are not wise in God's ways; left to ourselves, we'll tum away from God every time, due to our sin - as we confess in the Small Catechism:

"I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him." ( explanation of the Third Article)

But the God Who came to the magi, in spite of their lack of wisdom, also comes to us, telling us in His Word that:

" ... out of you (Bethlehem) shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel."(v.6)

That Ruler, of course, was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the Child the magi came to worship in today's Gospel.

The magi found the Christ because of the Word of the Scripture, which was shared with them when they came to Jerusalem to inquire concerning where Jesus was to be born (v. 1). The Word of God enabled the magi to find Jesus and reverence Him as King. And that same Word of God enables us also to find Jesus and reverence Him, not only as our King, but ultimately as our Savior from sin.

That is what Epiphany is about - Epiphany is about Jesus being found in His Word as King and Savior. What's more, Epiphany makes it clear that Jesus is not just King and Savior of Israel, but of all, including us. Both the Gospels of John (12: 15-33 & 18:37) and Matthew (Matthew 20:20-23 & 27:38) make it clear that Jesus reigned as King when He died on a cross. And St. Paul writes (Phil. 2) that, because Jesus "humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross," one day "every knee shall bow" before Him. Last week we heard that Christmas is about the death and resurrection of Christ, and this week we hear much the same thing, that Epiphany is really about the death of Jesus.

And with that we find ourselves back where we began, where we said that the details of Epiphany- what happened and what it's about, are often misunderstood. Today we have considered what the Bible actually says about Epiphany, and what we've seen is that Epiphany is about the Word of God revealing the Son of God as King and Savior of all. May we stay in God's Word always, and grow together into the fullness of what Epiphany is really about -

- in Jesus' ✝ Name,

Amen!