

Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
January 6, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This evening we celebrate Epiphany, the end of the Christmas Season and the beginning of the Epiphany season. Epiphany means “appearance,” or “manifestation,” like when someone says “I had an epiphany!” Someone who has an epiphany has a sudden realization. What was once hidden is now made “manifest,” or clear and obvious. In the next few weeks, we will be hearing all about manifestations of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, the revealing of who He actually is as the Son of God. At Epiphany, Jesus first appeared to Gentiles, the wise men from the East. That’s why Epiphany is also called “the Christmas of the Gentiles.” It’s when we first see clearly revealed that the king of the Jews is also the king of all people, the king of kings and lord of lords.

There are a number of traditions associated with Epiphany, number one being a house blessing. Have you noticed the letters C.M.B. written on door frames throughout Germany? Sometimes it’s written in chalk, and sometimes printed on tape and meant to look like chalk. Oftentimes the year is included. Maybe you even have the letters CMB written over your front door from a previous tenant. In Germany, there is a tradition between Christmas and Epiphany where “Sternsinger,” “Star singers,” go around town singing, collecting gifts, and writing the CMB blessing over door frames. CMB has a double meaning. It’s an abbreviation of the Latin phrase, “Christus mansionem benedicat,” “Christ bless this home,” but it also stands for the traditional names of the three wisemen, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. CMB. Whether at

Epiphany or when you move to a new home or even if you've been in your house for some time, it's always a good time for a house blessing, because everything is made holy by the Word of God and prayer (1 Tim. 4:5).

There's another tradition associated with Epiphany in Germany you might be interested in looking into. About 300 years after the wisemen visited the Christ Child, what were thought to be their bodies were brought from Constantinople, which is today Istanbul, Turkey, to Milan, Italy by the Bishop of Milan. In 1164, Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossa, the one who put the "Kaiser" in Kaiserslautern, brought the bodies of the three wisemen from Milan, Italy to Cologne, Germany. To this day, you can see the shrine of the three wisemen behind the high altar in the Cologne cathedral. Whether it's the actual three wisemen interred in Cologne or not perhaps we'll never know. But the belief that they are there has influenced Christian piety in the area for nearly a thousand years.

All we can really know about the wisemen from Scripture is what you heard read in our Gospel Text for today. Some number of wise men, or magi, from the East saw the star indicating one born king of the Jews, and so they set out on their journey to find this king and worship him. They brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which is why tradition holds there were three kings. And the assumption that these three wisemen were kings goes back to our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 60: "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." They could have come from Persia, or Arabia, India, or China. There are many traditions about their origins. All we know is that the wisemen came from a foreign land in the East to worship Christ, because Jesus was born not only as the king of the Jews, He was born as king of all people.

How did the wisemen know to come looking for Christ? When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked: “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.” Apparently the wisemen knew the prophecy about a star in Numbers 24, Balaam’s final oracle: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.” You may be familiar with the story of Balaam because of his talking donkey. In his fourth and final oracle, Balaam says a star shall come out of Jacob to rule over the peoples and a scepter shall rise out of Israel to crush the surrounding nations. How interesting that Balaam was not an Israelite. Balaam was a foreign prophet, a wise man, summoned from the east by a foreign king (Num 23:7). He proclaimed that though Israel was alone and small, “not counting itself among the nations” (Num 23:9), yet “the LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them” (Num 23:21). Already in the prophecy about the star, we hear what is tantamount to worship of Israel’s God from the mouth of a non-Israelite, a Gentile. We hear the prophecy of a humble King who will arise and crush His enemies.

Of course, when the wisemen arrived in Israel, they went to the capital, Jerusalem, to the palace of King Herod. That’s exactly where you would expect to find the king of the Jews. The wisemen found Herod, but that’s not where the star was directing them. Herod wasn’t even a Jew. He was an Edomite, a descendant of Jacob’s brother, Esau, a distant cousin of the Israelites! Herod was an imposter. He set Himself up as the king of the Jews and then set Himself against the legitimate King of the Jews, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Herod learned from the chief priests and the scribes of the people that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem, as we learn from the prophet Micah, chapter 5, where the LORD says: “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.” Bethlehem in Judah is so little compared to Jerusalem, so unexpected. Just as Israel looked small and of no account compared to the nations the LORD conquered before them, so does the little town of Bethlehem appear small and worthless. But Bethlehem is by no means least among the rulers of Judah because of the One who would be born there, the ruler who would shepherd His people, the scepter out of Israel that would rule all nations and crush His enemies. Bethlehem is great because Immanuel, God with us, is great. He is the ruler to reign over all Israel and over all the world, including the Gentiles.

The wisemen followed the star again until it came to rest over the place where the Christ child was, and so “they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matt 2:10). They went into the house and saw the child with His mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. These kings from the East came and worshiped the child born King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus, the Christ. Jesus is worthy of worship because He is Immanuel, God with us, the one who is both God and man. The Lord of everything, the King of all creation, became a child, born of the Virgin Mary. He didn’t look like a king, especially not compared to King Herod in Jerusalem. That’s because this King, our Immanuel, God with us, rarely looks like a king. God did not come to us in a palace but in a stable. His parents were not part of the ruling elite. They were commoners, even if descended from King David. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, not the royal city of Jerusalem. He associated with sinners and tax collectors, not a royal retinue. And finally, Jesus did not die warm in His bed, or heroically fighting in a worldly battle. He was not mourned by all His subjects and foreign dignitaries. No, Jesus died a shameful death on the cross, alone, forsaken by God and man, to reconcile God and man.

This king doesn't look like other kings and this king doesn't work like other kings. Our King, Jesus Christ who is the King of kings, has a different kind of kingdom. He says before Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." God's Kingdom is otherworldly, invisible, and it is in the midst of you (Luke 17:21). You, dear Christians, are Christ's kingdom because you are members of His body, His Kingdom, the Church. As Martin Luther says in his explanation of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: "God's Kingdom comes when our Heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity." The Father gives you the Holy Spirit in Baptism so that you believe His holy Word about the death and resurrection of Jesus for you. His Word gives you the strength you need to live in repentance here in time preparing for an eternity there, in the heavenly kingdom that will have no end.

This kingdom of believers, the Church, doesn't look like any other kingdom. It is a kingdom resembling its king: small, lowly, forsaken, a kingdom that comes to us in the Word and in the Sacraments. But this kingdom includes people from all times and places, all over the world. It is a kingdom that knows no geographical, ethnic, racial, or linguistic barriers because this king is for all people, both Jew and Gentile. He is a ruler to shepherd not only the flock of Israel but also those of us who were born into another flock, so that there is now one flock and one Shepherd (John 10:17). Our King, Jesus Christ, is the scepter rising out of Israel to crush Israel's enemies, Moab and Sheth, to crush the head of Satan. And so He rules over all people and all things until at last the kings of the earth have brought their glory into Christ's Kingdom (Rev 21:24), for "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:15). In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.