

Matthew 2:1–12
Epiphany
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
January 6, 2024

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,

In the United States, you see signs of Christmas already towards the end of Summer. By early November, most folks are gearing up for the holiday season and at the end of November, Christmas decorating begins, if it hasn't already before. The penitential season of Advent is neglected for the so-called Christmas spirit, and then by the time Christmas actually comes, most people have had enough of Christmas. They forget that the Christmas season is actually twelve days long. As far back as the Council of Tours in the year 567, the western church "proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany as a sacred and festive season." The twelve days of Christmas should be common knowledge from a famous song called "The Twelve Days of Christmas," but the consumerism of our culture has stolen many of our old Christmas traditions. Christmas really ended yesterday, on January 5th, the Twelfth Night of Christmas. And today, January 6, is the start of a new season: Epiphany.

Sometimes Epiphany is referred to as the "Christmas of the Gentiles." In Hispanic countries, most of the gifts are given on Epiphany Eve as the culmination of Christmas. In some places, Epiphany is referred to as "Three Kings' Day," for example, in Germany. That's because we celebrate the arrival of the Three Wise Men on Epiphany. And the name "Epiphany" itself comes from the Greek word meaning "manifestation" or "appearance" or "to give light."

Epiphany is all about Jesus as a light to the Gentiles. And where the light is, there is revelation.

Things begin to appear. Epiphany is all about the Gentiles coming into the true Israel, and the true Israel going out to the Gentiles. That is to say, Epiphany is all about missions.

Germany has a deep attachment to the wise men because, according to legend, the bodies of the three Wise Men were brought from Milan to Cologne in the year 1164. You can see the golden box where they lay on display at the Cologne cathedral. You also might have noticed the letters “C, M, B” along with the year, written in chalk over many door frames. This is supposed to stand for the names of the three wise men: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. When you see depictions of the wisemen in nativity scenes, Caspar is often portrayed as an African, Melchior as a European, and Balthasar as an Asian. The point is to show all the races of man coming to the Christchild. In reality, all the wisemen probably came from Persia, where astrology was common and where they could have known about the “star coming out of Jacob” as recorded in Numbers 24:17. Jewish exiles would have taken the Books of Moses with them into captivity. And there very well could have been more than three wisemen, a lot more. They are traditionally pictured as three because of the three gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Each gift has its significance: gold is brought to Jesus because He is a king, frankincense because He is a priest, and myrrh so that His body could be anointed in death. The gifts of the magi fit perfectly with who Jesus is and why He came to this world. From eternity He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Great High Priest who intercedes for us before God and who makes us priests. And He came to die for the sins of the world, to be laid into the grave, anointed by the women, before rising from the dead on the third day to live and reign for all eternity and over all nations. Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh for rest in the tomb.

Again, Epiphany is all about mission work, the work of being sent by God. We are reminded on Epiphany that Christ was born not only as the Messiah of the Jews but as the Savior of the whole world. When the wise men from the east come to Jerusalem, to the place they would expect to find the King of the Jews, Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled. There was a contender to the throne. Herod gathered all the chief priests and the scribes to find out where the Christ would be born, not that he might go worship Christ like the Magi, but that He could destroy the Christchild and preserve his own power.

The scribes knew exactly where the Messiah of Israel would be born, from Micah 5: “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.” And so Herod had all the boys in and around Bethlehem, two years old and younger, murdered in cold blood. The wise men came to Jerusalem, and the people there who you would most expect to receive the Messiah with joy ended up seeking to take our Lord’s life. Yet the Gentile magicians seek out the Christchild to bring Him gifts and to worship Him. Jesus came to His own, but His own people, the Jewish people, did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, to the Gentiles who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.

There’s irony in the fact that Jesus came as the Messiah of Israel and was rejected by them, and yet He has been received with joy by Gentile nations ever since then, starting with the wisemen. This can be surprising, but it’s also a regular pattern in salvation history. God promises to bless all mankind, for example, in Adam and in Noah. Even with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, God says: “In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The reason God set apart His people, Israel, and preserved them from the surrounding nations, was that the

Messiah might come out of Israel and bless all nations and bring their kingdoms into the Kingdom of God.

Throughout the Old Testament there are prophecies of this reversal of expectations. And then in the life of Jesus you see proclamation first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. After Christ ascended into Heaven, the disciples are sent as missionaries, first to Jerusalem and Judea, then to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The promise for all men came from the Jews and was finally going out to reach all men. And so it continues today and until the end of the world. Epiphany is all about missions, about proclaiming the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to the entire world, whether Jew or Gentile. All languages, tribes, nations, and peoples are included. In fact, oftentimes it's those you would least expect to be receptive to the Gospel who do in fact enter the church.

Even if you don't see it, this congregation is on the front lines of mission work. It doesn't always feel like it, but technically I am a missionary pastor and this is a missionary congregation. We live our life together like any other congregation in the United States, but for historical and political reasons we happen to exist here in Germany as an English-speaking congregation in a foreign environment. And God has gathered a little flock in this place from all over the world. We are surrounded on every side by Gentile sinners, longing for a Savior, whether they know it or not. How many of the over 50,000 Americans in this region have no church and don't know Jesus Christ? What of the other tens of thousands of Americans in Germany? And all over Europe? And what of all the people from India, and the Middle East, and Africa, and Asia, and from the Americas? People from all over the world end up right here to work or to study. We see them daily! Some come bearing the light of Christ with them. Others come from places of darkness and need to see the light. And then what of all the Germans, who

have most certainly fallen back into secularism and heathenism on a massive scale. Is there hope for them? Yes, there is hope for all who still have the breath of life. And the LORD has put you right here for the very task of reaching these people.

This work of missions doesn't mean you are to give up your day job and go preaching on the streets of downtown Kaiserslautern or in the BX. In a way that's why I'm here. Your task is to come each and everyday to the Bread of Life in Bethlehem, to the Lord's House, to the Word of God made flesh. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the words of Scripture. Come to church as often as you can to receive the refreshment you need in the forgiveness of sins. Only in that way are you equipped to share the love and the joy you find in the Christchild with all those spiritual Gentiles God brings into your life, whether at home, at work, and on the streets. Manifest the love of Christ Jesus to these people and reveal your Savior to them. Support the church's mission with your gold, frankincense, and myrrh, with whatever gifts the Lord has given you. The LORD has blessed you richly in Jesus Christ that you might be a blessing to others, bringing them along to the babe in Bethlehem, the King of Kings and Lord of lords. 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.