

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today the church celebrates the Feast Day of The Epiphany of our Lord. This Christian feast is intended to celebrate the “shinning forth” or the revelation of God coming to us in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ. This is a feast day that is usually celebrated twelve days after Christmas but we have moved it one day ahead this year. So today, on this, the first Sunday of the new year, we celebrate the visitation of the Magi to the newly born child Jesus, and we do so according to our Gospel lesson from Matthew. However, we interpret this Gospel lesson today according to Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. Because of Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus, we look upon this visit of the Wise Men with a sentimentality that sees this same scene today in our Gospel, in a cozy barn that in turn gives a very contented interpretation of today’s Gospel lesson.

We like the image of a cozy rustic barn rather than the house the Magi enter into today in the Gospel lesson. And so, we sing about this visit of the Magi and remember the cozy scene from Luke, as we sing, star of wonder, star of night...we sing of this royal and beautiful bright star during the darkest days of the year. With our sentimental view, this royal star takes us to a very serene setting of a pleasant little barn with a child swaddled safely from the elements sleeping under the watchful protection of Jospheh while Mary ponders all of this in her heart.

I guess with all the artistic renditions of this scene along with the songs and hymns that we associate with it, one can only look upon this scene and romanticize and sentimentalize. But the reality of the Gospel passages today from Matthew does not support our romanticized and sentimentalized vision or understanding of this scene. In our romanticized and sentimentalized vision, we tend to combine the Matthean passage with the Lukan passage in order to get a cozy image or understanding of this scene.

Today our appointed Gospel lesson is from the Gospel of Matthew and this narrative says nothing about a manger scene, no room at the inn, or the baby being wrapped in swaddling clothes...we only hear this:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matt 2:1-2)

¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ *On entering the house,* they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matt 2:10-11)

I read this again because I want us to recognize how we read into the passage with our sentimentality because we like our cozy Nativity scene. However, in our sentimentality we temporarily allow ourselves to believe something that just isn't in the text in order to make our vision of this Nativity cozy, official, and even regal and we end up projecting our romantic and sentimental feelings into our Gospel text and miss the deeper or less obvious lesson Matthew is attempting to foreshadow for us.

John Henry Hopkins, the composer of *We Three Kings*, the hymn we will sing in just a bit, seems to know the intent behind those who came bearing gifts as well as the gifts themselves. The fourth verse of the hymn draws a darker scene than the ones we tend to sentimentalize. In the fourth verse, Hopkins draws our attention to the reality of the scene with these lyrics regarding the gifts being presented to the Christ child:

⁴ Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb.¹

Imagine for a moment someone showing up with the gift of Myrrh after you give birth to your first-born child. This is not really a gift that is going to show up on many baby registries. But this gift is not presented as the formal and proper thing to do...this gift reveals something bigger; it brings something more into this scene.

I'm going to make an assumption, which is dangerous; nonetheless, if I asked for you to describe this Nativity scene in one word I don't think "danger," "fear," or "death" would be a word used to describe the scene. But this is the birth narrative of Jesus in this Gospel that is before us today...that includes a hint of death brought to Jesus in the gift of myrrh.

Today from the Gospel of Matthew we do not have the sentimentality of a Nativity scene, we have more of an emphasis on the social tension this birth causes as well as the danger of the social threat of power that arises with this birth...and the eventual death of this child. In this scene today from Matthew's Gospel, is a power struggle, a struggle between the power of God being revealed in a gentle way that we would not expect from a baby. This baby is a power nonetheless that King Herod sees as a threat...to Herod, this baby is born to usurp his royal power.

Like Herod, we too share in that threatening fear when our assumed power of our "self-drawn-conclusion" about Holy Scripture and our assumptions about faith are threatened by other interpretations of scripture or understandings of faith. We like Herod want that destroyed and some will even deceitfully attempt to destroy any such attempts to our conclusions about our faith and our views of Holy Scripture.

This Nativity in some ways...when it is broken down and studied and not sentimentalized and romanticized confronts us all and reminds us that our faith does not function in a safe and cozy environment, it is played out in the violence, the threat, and the danger of the real world. But even as the darkness of the deceit that plays out in the world and in this lesson threatens our cozy view of this birth scene, we know too that the darkness of this world will not destroy what this birth means for all who look upon this scene.

When we truly look at Herod's threat and the very hint of death found in the gifts presented, may we see that God does not protect this baby with an army, nor is God's power revealed with violence and war against Herod. Jesus Christ is not born to simply usurp worldly power but to save the world from corrupt power by dying and rising from that death. Likewise, our faith, as

¹ *With One Voice, A Lutheran resource for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995, hymn #646.

we go into the world, cannot be used as a weapon of power that steps on others to elevate ourselves and threaten others, nor does our faith isolate us by making us better than the darkness found in the world out there. Our faith is this baby...it is in the world, it is in the darkness, it is vulnerable, it exists in the threat and deceit that is in the world and surrounds this child...the grace given to us through our faith is the very gift God gives to all the world...our faith is this baby born in the darkness of the violence that threatens it, but the faith that is born and given for all the world is the light of grace we share in the darkness of the world.

The light of grace and mercy we celebrate this day threatens the darkness of tyranny and oppression. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that “our light has come.” Isaiah makes this announcement because he knows that the darkness that threatens the earth will be overcome with the light of faith given to each of us. Isaiah’s prophecy is like the announcement that unto us is born a “Savior” who is the light of faith that no darkness can overcome. The light does not come to illuminate the light, it comes into the darkness that surrounds each of us right now. Isaiah speaks of the darkness that covers the earth, and thick darkness that covers the peoples. But the grace given to us all in this child is light and it will be the same light we take into the darkness of this world through our faith and share with others.

The world will threaten that light of grace just as we see Herod is threatened by the very child that is the power of grace and forgiveness. But what Herod like each of us who sentimentalize this Nativity ignore or overlook, is that the power of grace comes at a very dear price. But the Wise Men remind us of the price paid in the gift of myrrh presented to the baby. This gift of Myrrh, is a rare intoxicating fragrant perfume that is presented to Jesus at his birth and will be presented again at his death by Nicodemus who had at first come to Jesus by night. But it is in this gift of Myrrh, that we are reminded of the true power...the power of the cross...the victory over death, not just for this baby before us today, but for each one of us who look upon this baby in faith.

Arise, shine; says the prophet, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon us all in the birth of grace and life...the birth of our Savior...the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the incarnation of God with us...who is our gift of grace and life. We are NOT JUST the recipients of grace and life; we are the bearers of this good news for the world and in the world. As this Good News is made known to each of us assembled here today, we then become the manifestation of Christ to the world...we are the light in the darkness of the reality of this world.

May the good news we share of the revelation and resurrection of Jesus Christ be an Epiphany...a moment of sudden revelation or insight for all the world and not just a select few.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.