

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Sing in Exultation*, No.6

As They Did

January 9, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

If you'd like, you could turn back to the book of Matthew – the second chapter. We'll get there in a few minutes, but if you turn there now, you'll beat the rush. Matthew, Chapter 2, and those first twelve verses that were just read for us.

Well, the news media let me down this past week – no big surprise there. This past Thursday, January 6, all they wanted to talk about was the one-year anniversary of the "invasion" of the Capital. I looked and looked and no one, that I could find, even mentioned that the same day, January 6, was, far more eternally importantly, Epiphany, which makes today the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany.

And it could have been mentioned so easily – they had a perfect tie-in, because Epiphany actually marks another sort of invasion.

Epiphany is the climax of the seasons of Advent and Christmas. It begins on the twelfth day of Christmas (you know, twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-leaping, and all that), and it turns our attentions from the celebration of Jesus' arrival to the reason for His coming – the reason that He invaded our world.

And it's all wrapped up in the visit of these wise men from a distant land who, themselves, in a sense, invaded Israel in their pursuit of this newborn King.

The word, "Epiphany" means "to reveal."

Now, honestly, it all seems very strange to me, but reveals have gotten to be huge events in our culture lately – especially the reveal of engagements, the reveal of

a pregnancy, and the revealing of an expected baby's gender.

People make huge events of these reveals – you can watch some of them that go very wrong on YouTube.

But here in Matthew we find a reveal that not only goes very right but one that matters far more than any of those.

Epiphany is the revealing of Jesus as the Lord and King, of not just the Jews, but of all nations and peoples. It's the fruition of Isaiah's prediction that the One to come "– will be a light to the nations."¹

That's why Matthew was careful to record this event.

That's why this invasion is in our Scriptures today – it's the fulfillment of prophecy, of words like Isaiah's: "Kings and princes shall see, arise, and prostrate themselves before Him,"² and also of Balaam, who said, "A star shall come from Jacob and a scepter shall arise from Israel."³

Whenever it was that they actually came – and there are different theories about that – the wise men show us that there were non-Jews who recognized the fact that Jesus' arrival revealed God's concern for our broken world and His commitment to repair it.

That's why, of all the reveals that have ever happened in our world, this is the one that matters the most.

William Dix recognized this, and 163 years ago, on January 6, Epiphany, 1859, he wrote a poem about it which we know as the hymn, *As With Gladness Men of Old*. We've already sung it. (It's on page 163 in the hymnal).

Most hymnwriters in Dix' day were pastors, but Dix was not. He was actually a used car salesman. No, he wasn't. I was just seeing if you were paying attention.

Dix was, though, an insurance salesman who had time to write these words – ironically for our days of Covid here – because he was sick and quarantined at home and could not attend that morning's Epiphany worship service at his church.

Maybe God will move some of you watching from home today to write a song?

While there at home in bed, Dix read and re-read this Matthew text, the Epiphany text, and as he did, he began to compare in his mind the wise men's response to Jesus with his own response to Jesus – and with the response to Jesus of the people of his day.

That's where we get the cadence of the song: "As they (the wise men) – so we (today)"

He worked on it all day, apparently, and by the end of the day, it was complete.

¹ Isaiah 42:6, 49:6

² Isaiah 49:7

³ Numbers 24:17

He held onto it for a year, wondering if insurance salesmen should really be writing poetry, but then turned it over to a publisher and in that next year it was published set to a tune adapted specifically for it: the same tune to which we sing the hymn, *For the Beauty of the Earth*.

Interestingly, William Dix, personally, did not like the tune, even though, as you can see if you look down in the lower right corner of the hymnal page there, it was actually renamed for him in his honor.

So, for 150 years, his name has been the title of a musical piece that he never liked.

Isn't that ironic? You write what's become a very well-known, long-enduring song—in one day, and it's forever attached to a tune you don't like. That's bad enough, but then the tune you don't like is labeled with your name.

Maybe that was some sort of divine lesson in humility for Dix—I don't know.

It's worth noting too that this is the only well-known Epiphany song that does not label the wise men either "magi" or "kings," and it's the only Epiphany song that doesn't state there were three of them, since we don't know how many there were.

I find all of that interesting, but of course it's the message of the song that I really want to talk about today, because the message of the song is also the message of the Matthew text—which I'm going to boil down to four short statements.

Regarding Jesus, those who are truly wise will follow the example of these wise men past and will:

First - give all to find Him.

Second - recognize the divinity within Him.

Third - value nothing above Him.

Fourth - anticipate eternity with Him.

The wise person will:

Give all to find Jesus.

Recognize the divinity within Him.

Value nothing above Him, and

Anticipate eternity with Him.

The wise will, first, give all to find Him.

How far did these men travel? We're not told. We're only told that they came from the east, where they had seen a star and recognized from their study of the stars something that the very people who held God's prophecy in their hands did not realize: the fact that a king had been born.

So convinced were these guys that they set right out—they left home and family. They invested a lot of time. They spent a lot of money. They took big risks, travelling dangerous roads carrying expensive goods.

In their pursuit they held nothing back.

They gave all they had to find Jesus.

Did the guiding star behold,

*As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward,
beaming bright;*

So, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to Thee.

Are we giving all we have to find Jesus—to find His word and His will for us today?

Compared to these guys, how much effort—really—how much expense—how much time have we given to finding Jesus and what He wants for us?

We can answer that question only for ourselves, but in this age of easy distraction, I think God's Spirit wants us to consider that.

As these men show us, those who are wise will stop at nothing—**those who are wise will give all to find Him.**

Second, the wise recognize the divinity of Jesus.

When people have a low estimation of someone, they might say, "I wouldn't walk across the street to see that guy."

But the exact opposite was true here. The wise men walked across the world to find Him.

We know they knew who Jesus was, because right away there in verse 2 of our scripture, they admit to Herod that they were there, not just to see Him, not to catch a quick glimpse of Him or to say they'd been in the same room with Him.

No, they admit they were there to worship Him.

And you know they were serious by how disturbed Herod was by what they said.

Right there in Herod's back yard was a king—but so much more than just a king!

Here was a person, a being, of such magnitude and importance that guys from across the world would show up to worship Him, and all the while the leader of the nation into which He's born—the nation to whom all the prophecy of His coming was entrusted—is caught flat-footed, asleep, on the job.

I really wonder if Herod was more upset by the threat of Jesus to his own personal power or by how much face he had just lost to those wise men because of his own inattentiveness.

The wise see who Jesus really is: they recognize His divinity, His worthiness to be not just pursued or admired but worshipped, exalted and praised.

*As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before Him whom heaven and
earth adore.*

So, may we, with willing feet ever seek Thy mercy seat.

The wise recognize Jesus' divinity and respond to Him accordingly.

But do we? Are we so wise?

Do we see Jesus as just one of the guys? A pushover? Our cosmic buddy who can do cool things for us when we need Him to?

Or do we see Jesus as He really is: the perfect, divine, son of God?

Do we realize that He's the third person of the Holy Trinity: that He's fully God—completely holy, all seeing, all knowing and all powerful?

Do we see Him as the wise men saw Him, or as Herod saw Him: a threat to doing as we choose?

We have to face that question, because we can hardly scoff at the Herods of the world until we recognize the Herod in ourselves.

Just like those first wise men, **the wise of our day recognize the divinity of Jesus.**

Third, the wise person also values nothing above Him.

The biggest part of those wise men's world was just like the biggest part of our world today: pursuing things and clinging to things that won't last while ignoring those that will.

Like those famous lines that missionary Jim Elliott wrote in his journal back in 1949: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what which he cannot lose."⁴

Centuries before Elliott said it, those wise men understood that. After giving all they had to find Jesus, and then, upon finding Him, recognizing Him for who He was, they held nothing back from Him. They gave Him all they had. They valued nothing above Him. They presented to Him everything of value that they possessed.

They gave Him all that they'd brought along with them: gifts rare and expensive – fit for royalty, you see, which tells us that even before they left on their journey, they knew the significance of the one they were seeking.

But their gifts to Jesus went beyond these things.

The way verse 11 there puts it, "they bowed down and worshipped Him," is significant. Including both terms this way indicates the magnitude of their reverence. The text is telling us that they were presenting, offering, themselves to Him. They were offering all they were: their lives, their futures, their wills and wishes and dreams.

All that was valuable to them.

All they would die to defend.

All that they valued – they offered to Jesus.

Had He been old enough, they might have asked Him, as later wise men have asked Jesus, "Here I am Lord. What will you have me to do?"

As they offered gifts most rare at that manger rude and bare;

So may we with holy joy, pure and free from sin's alloy,

All our costliest treasures bring,

Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King.

As we watch these wise ones of old bring their treasures to Jesus, I think the question God's Spirit asks of us is: "Is there something that you value or that I value that we're holding onto – that we're keeping from Jesus – that we refuse to let Him do with as he pleases?"

Is there something in your life like that? What is it? Your wealth? Your future? Your time? Your talents? Your plans? Your child?

Whatever it is, please know this: the wisest thing any of us can do for our wealth, our future, our children, our eternity is to give them – to entrust them – to Jesus.

The wise person values nothing above Him.

Those who are truly wise:

Give all to find Jesus.

Recognize the divinity within Him.

Value nothing above Him.

And finally, the wise anticipate eternity with Him.

The wise realize there is far more to life than just the here and now.

There are laws that are higher than earthly laws.

There are commitments that are stronger than earthly commitments.

There are principles that transcend this day and age.

We see that in the response of the wise men to Herod.

When confronted with the decision to either obey Herod and return to Him, or to obey the dream and avoid him, they chose the latter, verse 12 says, and they returned to their country by a route that avoided Jerusalem.

Now certainly, Scripture calls us to be good citizens and respect our earthly leaders – and to obey their laws whenever and however we can.

At the same time, when earthly laws collide with Heavenly laws, and earthly truths conflict with Heavenly truths, we must choose the Heavenly.

And these determinations of what's earthly and what's heavenly are sometimes tough to sort out, aren't they? These are the things that are causing lots of conflict within Christ's body even today.

But the discussions are worth having, because earthly governments are not the end of all authority.

There are greater truths than what some earthly governments can grasp, and even though there will be an earthly price to be paid – and we have to face that – still, those who follow Jesus must choose the Heavenly over the earthly.

The wise men knew that and did that. They had to do it, even though their loyalty to Heaven came at a price.

And there was a price, wasn't there? The little boy babies of Bethlehem paid it. That's a Christmas story that we don't talk about very much.

In a fallen world, following Jesus will always cost something.

But the thing is, followers of Jesus, if they're to be followers of Jesus, have to follow Jesus – in spite of the conflict it may well bring.

The wise realize that. They realize that eternal realities are more important than earthly realities, and that when all is said and done, it's loyalty to Heaven that matters the most.

Holy Jesus, every day keep us in the narrow way;

And when earthly things are past,

Bring our ransomed souls at last where they need no star to guide,

Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

It's the eternal things that matter.

It's the eternal things that we live for.

It's the eternal things that Jesus died for – and that we may be called to die for too.

But even in death, there's life for those whose King is Jesus.

The wise realize all that and so anticipate eternity with Jesus.

The wise give all to find Jesus.

Recognize the divinity of Jesus.

Value nothing above Jesus, and,

Anticipate eternity with Jesus.

What a tremendous aspiration for the new year ahead: to be at least as wise as these wise men of old.

⁴ *Journal*, Jim Elliott, October 28, 1949

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father – we want to be wise. That’s what we pray for.

With the turn of a new year, I know there are people praying for all sorts of things – for health, for wealth, for peace, for success, for direction.

And all that is appropriate and good. But Father, help us take counsel from these wise men of long ago and to do as they did.

Help us take counsel from the young King Solomon, who above all else, asked you for wisdom – divine wisdom – to make right decisions, to be able to hear your Spirit, to follow you well, to lead our own lives and families well and to be faithful to you, no matter the earthly cost, until we see you face to face.

May it be so in us. Give us wisdom for our days, we pray in Jesus’ name.

Closing Song: *As With Gladness Men of Old*

Note the repetition of joy – gladness, happiness, willingness, eagerness.

It could well be that all that joy leads up to, and is because of a fifth verse Dix wrote that is almost never printed in hymnals. It talks about heaven and goes like this:

*In that heavenly country bright, need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun which goes not down.
There forever may we sing alleluias to our King!*

That is the destination of the truly wise. Are you among them – among those that seek first Jesus and His Kingdom?

I hope you are.

May we all be among them today.

As with Gladness Men of Old

(Sung to hymn tune DIX, *For the Beauty of the Earth*)

As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold;
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to Thee.

As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger bed,
There to bend the knee before
Him whom heav’n and earth adore,
So, may we with willing feet
Ever seek the mercy seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
At that manger rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from sin’s alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to Thee our heav’nly King.

Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

In that heavenly country bright,
Need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun which goes not down.
There forever may we sing
Alleluias to our King!