

EPIPHANY SERMON
THE EXAMPLE OF THE MAGI
2024, Faith Lutheran Church

Christmas, the same Christmas that took so long to finally get here, is now a rearview mirror memory. Less than two weeks ago. Many, if not all the decorations, are put away. The gifts given. The tree tossed out or lugged back to the attic if it is a fake tree. Diets have begun to take off those Christmas party pounds. Good ol' Christmas, a fading memory.

But wait, hold on. This morning, I call you to remember one more part of the Christmas story. The magi, wise men, kings, astrologers, whatever you call them. We are asked to remember the wise men every year on the Feast of the Epiphany.

Their arrival onto the Christmas scene causes us to consider a few questions. Why are we so quick to relegate major events of our Christian faith to short one-day celebrations, like Easter, Pentecost, Christmas? Why do we quickly move on to other more important things? Could it be that we are more like Herod than the wise kings?

Herod was a ruler, a ruthless ruler. The people he governed existed for one purpose: to serve him. So, Herod was shocked when these visitors from the East came looking for the newborn king of the Jews. This was an open challenge to Herod's power, his position, his prestige. This newborn king was a threat, an enemy who had to be eliminated. And when the wise men did not return to Herod and disclose the location of the newborn king, Herod was furious. He ordered all baby boys, two years old and under, to be killed. Brutal, murderous Herod.

Herod was certainly engrossed with himself. But are we any different? When we approach life as if things are owed to us; when we see others as persons to serve us; when following Jesus becomes a threat to our selfish way of life.

But let's be clear, this is nothing new. Jesus has always been a threat to the self-centered and self-sufficient. The infant Jesus is a nice, sweet thought, but He lacks the power to change us. He is only a baby. And so, we pay him homage as we come to the stable, we stop, kiss the baby and quickly move on, leaving Him in the stable, a comfortable distance away.

We don't want to take responsibility for raising this child in our lives because we know that the baby grows up to become the Christ who will make serious claims on us. Eventually, He challenges the very core of our being.

If Jesus is not a dynamic, life-giving force, the very center of our lives, then we have left Him back in Bethlehem. We've closed our hearts to His life and message. We act like Herod.

Herod said he wanted to go to Bethlehem and adore the newborn King, so he asked the wise men for the GPS coordinates of the newborn king.

But that was all a bluff. We know Herod was not interested in worshiping baby Jesus. What an ugly picture it would have been, Herod standing before the manger with a knife hidden beneath his robe. He was not interested in paying homage, only in the swift eradication of a threat. Herod's only interest was to destroy Jesus.

But tell me, when we fail to worship the Lord, are we any different? When we close our hearts to God, we are Herod. Herod is a terrible example for us. But, oh, the magi in today's Bible lesson, they are great examples.

It is a bit odd that the Christian faith would hold up pagans as examples for us to emulate. Astrology has nothing to do with Christianity. Yet, today we have Eastern astrologers as examples of faith. Why? Three reasons I'd like to point out why they are positive examples of faith to us.

First, the astrologers were passionate people. The essential passion of every life is the search for something to believe in. What are the passions of your life? Where are you searching for meaning and truth. These astrologers from the East set out looking for a newborn King. Not just any ordinary newborn king, but the newborn King of the Jews who was going to change the world. What they found was not a king surrounded by royal splendor. They found lowly people with a newborn in shabby circumstances. It was a pathetic setting for a king.

But it was precisely in this situation that they came to adore the Lord. There's no way to make such a long arduous journey without passion. And when they finally arrived, they could have looked at the surroundings and those peasant people and this little child and said, "This can't be it." They could have turned around and headed back East. But they did not. They entered to worship the baby King because their passion for the truth would have it no other way. Think of it, the very

first worshipers of Christ were not even religious people of God's chosen race. So, for our first positive example of the astrologers, they were passionate people.

Second positive example, the astrologers were humble people. Humble means down to earth, real, not pretentious. Only humility allows you to prostrate yourself before anyone, much less a baby you do not know. But it also takes humility to be joyful and the astrologers were joyful. The Bible account says they were overcome with joy upon finding Jesus.

Joy is an element that is often lacking in the lives of many Christians. Just by looking at our faces, you'd think that Jesus was still in the tomb. Maybe it is because we are not humble before the Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength. The positive examples of the magi is that they were passionate and they were humble and joyful.

The third example is the way the magi were faith-filled, faithful people. Faith-filled and faithful. Faith-filled because they saw Jesus for who He truly was, the Son of God. They believed what they saw and were filled with faith.

Faithful because they did what they were told in the dream. They did not go back to Herod. Rather, they went back to their homeland by another route. They were willing to act when God spoke to them.

We need to act on the messages of God. God gives us the grace to act and speak God's word. Yet, so often we stand back and fail to cooperate with God. "Oh, I don't think God wants me to do this now. Maybe tomorrow I will do it."

But God does want us to act when God calls. God does want to use us as God's instruments in so many situations. If we would be faithful, then we must be willing to respond to God's grace when God gives it. Those magi were certainly passionate, humble, faith-filled and faithful.

The Bible lesson of the Epiphany, the arrival of the magi, has quite a powerful message for us to assess who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. Sadly, we have to admit that at times we can be like Herod. But hopefully, we will also find that we are becoming more like the astrologers, the magi. That is passionate, humble and faithful to the Lord.

For the essence of Christmas is that Jesus has come to enable us to follow God, and like the magi, to be passionate, humble and faithful. Happy Epiphany. Amen.