

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today is Epiphany – January 6. Every year has the Day of Epiphany – January 6 just as every year has a Christmas – December 25. But unless Epiphany falls on a Sunday it goes right by and is little noticed by most Lutherans. Epiphany is when we remember the wise men and King Herod and the star and the gifts the wise men bring to the infant Jesus. Now except for King Herod each of these are usually remembered when we celebrate Christmas. Sunday School Pageants feature the star and the gifts and the wise men – usually three of them. But on Epiphany we remember the whole story.

In the time of King Herod, Matthew writes, after Jesus was born, wise men came from the east.

In the time of King Herod – ancient people needed some way to mark time – what year are we talking about? Someone might ask. Oh, during the tenth year of the reign of Alexander the Great, would come the

response. Time was marked by the rule of kings – even in Jesus’ story time is marked by reference to the most important people – in this case Herod the King.

After Jesus was born.

Matthew knows nothing of the journey from Nazareth or of Jesus being born in the stable – or at least he makes no mention of these. But where Jesus is born is important to him – in Bethlehem – in the town that David, Israel’s great king, was from.

Wise men came from the East.

In Greek, the word for them is magi. It is the word from which our English word magician, derives. Some speculate that they were astrologers, watching the night sky for the signs that would direct events on earth. The scriptures speak against astrologers and sorcerers - speak against those who would look to someone or something other than the Lord for guidance. But in this case they are not led astray by following the star, but are led to the one born King of the Jews.

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod was not interested in any new king, nor was the Jerusalem establishment looking for a change. Always there are those who like things the way they are. The man who owns the only gas station in a small town does not rejoice at the news of competition arriving. His customers, on the other hand, are buzzing with excitement at the news.

So Herod called all the chief priests and scribes of the people and inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. In Bethlehem of Judea, they told him.

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. He sent the wise men on their way telling them to come back and tell him where he could find the child.

Those of you who know the story know that Herod had one intention – not to worship this new king but to kill him. But God would be in charge of Jesus’ story – not Herod.

So the wise men followed the star until it stopped over the house where the child was. On entering the house they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. And opening their treasure chests they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Why do we have a special day just for this story? It is because the Son of God was revealed to those who were not Jews. The wise men represent the nations coming to worship the God of Israel through Jesus. In a way this story is a sneak preview of what God will do in Jesus. The whole world will come to worship the one born King of the Jews and not only the whole world but people of every age as well.

The other night at the church council meeting Pastor Eileen had us read the last words in the gospel according to St. Matthew. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.

As we heard that great commission once more I realized Jesus said, Make disciples of all nations. Not of all people, but of all nations.

All through history people have divided the world into us and them. Herod divided the world that way. Most all of Israel’s history is seen in that way. But when the wise men came to Jesus us and them became we. And when you share the love of Jesus and the story of Jesus and the promises of Jesus us and them becomes we. All nations, ethnos is the word in Greek – our word ethnic derives from that. Make disciples of all nations. A member of this congregation, Marla Wood, is seeking to do that in Japan. She will tell people that they belong to the very same Jesus to whom she belongs - the same Jesus to whom you belong.

For the story we remember at Epiphany is not a story of Herod, nor of wise men, nor of gifts or the star but is the story of Jesus. It is the story of the love of God that is so great that God has entered into our own human life

in Jesus. Herod was not able to stop God's plan for Jesus – nor would another Herod thirty years later be able to stop God's plan. Nor would Pontius Pilate, nor would the disciples fear, Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, not cross nor death itself. God intends to gather all nations, and you in Jesus.

And when it happens you will know that the love of God is greater than anything that could divide us.

No wonder wise men journeyed and saw and rejoiced.