

The Epiphany of Our Lord  
January 6, 2019  
Matthew 2:1-12  
“The Star of the Show”

You know the plot line of Epiphany. Epiphany is the Wise Men’s day in the spotlight, their day to take center stage, their time in the limelight. Epiphany is the day the cameras focus on the Magi from the East, carrying gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus. you know the story, don’t you? The Wise Men travel a long way to get to Jerusalem in order to find the newborn King of the Jews. They consult with wicked King Herod, who pretends that he wishes to worship the baby Jesus too. Then, leaving Jerusalem, the Wise Men complete their journey to Bethlehem and reach their destination and accomplish their mission.

That’s Epiphany. The Christmas angels have receded into heaven. The shepherds have returned to their flocks rejoicing and praising God. Now, today, we see the Wise Men as the stars of the show.

But I have a suggestion for you today. May I suggest that Herod was just as much the star of Epiphany as those Wise Men?

Wait a minute, you’re thinking. How can that be? You know what the Wise Men were like. The Wise Men were shining examples of faith: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him’ (Matthew 2:1-2).

The Wise Men seem well-suited to be stars of Epiphany, don’t they? Certainly they had superstar quality! They were intelligent, rich, sophisticated. Any one of them might have auditioned to be the next James Bond. But they were at the same time humble, trusting, naïve. They probably would have preferred to play the role of Forrest Gump. That is to say, they had all the worldly advantages going for them, and yet, above all, they were faithful.

The Wise Men were well-studied in the wisdom of the world, but apparently they were also students of Scripture. Chances are they were astrologers; that was usually part of the job of men who advised the kings of the ancient East. That, of course, is no example for us. God prohibits astrology, horoscopes, fortune-telling, because He tells us everything we need to know. But it wasn’t through astrology that the Wise Men understood the meaning of the amazing new star that had appeared in the sky. Most likely it was through diligent study of the Old Testament scriptures. The captivity of the Jews six hundred years before Christ had spread God’s Word into Babylon, Persia, “the East.” And in Numbers 21:17, God had promised, “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” It is quite likely that the Wise Men had studied that passage and interpreted it to mean that a star would mark the birth of the One who would hold the scepter of Israel, that is, be the great King. That – studying the scriptures – is a marvelous example for us.

The Wise Men were indeed also men of wealth and position. And yet they were humble at the same time. When their mission was fulfilled “going into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother and they fell down and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11). These are rich men, important men. But here they are, bowing down to a child! It is a beautiful example of faith, isn't it? This is star-quality faith.

Everything that we have is a gift from that little baby. Everything we have is to be dedicated to and used for that little child. And no position, no honor, no achievement makes us great before Him.

Yet the Wise Men are also a marvelous example of faith that those who aren't great may approach Him. The Wise Men were Gentiles, yet they were confident that the God and King of the Jews would accept their worship. Epiphany is the day God showed that Christ was for everyone, Jews and Gentiles too. At the time of Jesus, that was not a foregone conclusion. Many of Jesus' own people thought the Messiah was only for their nation. It took a lot of faith for the Gentile Wise Men to travel those hundreds of miles – maybe a thousand miles – to worship and to give offerings to the King of the Jews.

Certainly the Wise Men were men of faith. We can see them cast as the stars of the Epiphany drama, can't we? But remember, we said that King Herod was as much the star of Epiphany as they were.

Herod was an example of darkest evil. If anyone in the Bible could play Darth Vader, I think Herod would be the one to pull it off. He was nobody's star. Herod was a crazed murderer. He had his favorite wife and his son both executed because he suspected that they were plotting to take his throne. Do you want to know how wicked Herod really was? A couple of years after what is recorded in our text, when Herod was sick and knew that he was going to die, his deepest regret was knowing that no one was going to mourn him when he was gone. So he had his sister call together all the chief nobles of the Jews to gather together in the Hippodrome of Jerusalem. Guards were placed around the building and given orders that when Herod was dead, everyone inside was to be slaughtered. In that way, he knew that there would be weeping throughout the country. Plenty of mourners would be in Jerusalem at his death. Herod was insane. And he was evil!

“When Herod the king heard this (namely, the birth of the king of the Jews), he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). Well, of course Jerusalem was troubled! There was no way anyone could possibly know what Herod would do.

Herod had only one thought, but he concealed it under the guise of religious piety: “assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “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.” Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him” (Matthew 2:4-8). It’s the worst kind of wickedness, isn’t it? Herod used the religious teachers and the sincere but naïve faith of the Wise Men to accomplish his devilish plan. This was nothing less than the dark plotting of satanic wickedness.

So, then, how in the world could we ever say that Herod could be just as much a star as were the Wise Men? Herod was just as much a star as the Wise Men because neither of them is the star; the star itself is the star of this show. “We say His star when it rose and have come to worship Him” (Matthew 2:2) said the Wise Men. “And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matthew 2:9b-10). The star is the star of the epiphany show because it is God’s invitation inviting all people to come to the Savior.

The Wise Men were faithful because they had something to place their faith in – God’s promised of a Savior. The star signaled the fulfillment of Numbers 24:17 – but even more significantly of Genesis 3:15, that the seed of the woman, Christ, would crush the head of the serpent, Satan. And it is the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 that the Virgin would bear a son, Immanuel, god with us. Further it signals the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:5: “He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.” Not the Wise Men, not Herod, but the star is the star because it announces the arrival of the Promised One, the fulfillment of all God’s promises, the One who would be born to live and suffer and die and rise so that all people could be saved.

God put the star in the sky where all people could see it. That was God’s way of announcing to the Gentiles that God invites them to rejoice and be glad for their Savior has been born. The star shined in the East over the Wise Men. It shined over Jerusalem too. Over Herod. Yes, the star of Epiphany was inviting him too.

God even gave to Herod a personal interpretation of the star. Remember when Herod called the priests and scribes and they recited to him the words of the prophecy of Micah which revealed that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem? Herod’s only purpose in hearing that prophecy was to kill the infant Jesus. But even in Herod’s wicked scheming the Lord was inviting Herod in an attempt to save him. “Herod, look into the sky, that star is there inviting you too. The Savior has been born to redeem you too!” Despite Herod’s evil intent and satanic wickedness, God deeply desired him to believe and be saved.

That is the message of the star, the message of Epiphany: Jesus Christ is our Savior no matter who we are, where we are, how wickedly sinful we have been.

Neither the Wise Men nor Herod were the stars of the Epiphany show, but they weren't just extras either. They were significant figures and so are you. In fact we are all unworthy to be stars – we are all outsiders, sinners – people upon whom the real Star has shown and continues to shine as He lifts up His face upon you and gives you peace with the assurance that by His life, death, and resurrection He has secured for you the forgiveness of all of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.