

**St. Paul's Anglican Church
Epiphany; Matt 2:1 to 12
Jan 6, 2019**

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Though the Christmas season officially ends with today's celebration of Epiphany, our readings continue to be concerned with the birth of our Savior. For example, early Christians, which likely includes the gospel writers, saw our Old Testament reading (Isa 60:1-9) as a foretelling of Jesus' birth, and visits by the shepherds and the wise men.

It contains God's promise that the Gentile nations, many of whom afflicted Israel in the past, will see the great light of God's glory encompassing this great city and will come to worship the God of Israel. Isaiah said, **the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you, and, the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you.** When our Lord was born in Bethlehem, the light of God's glory appeared to the shepherds, and at the direction of the angel, they visited and worshipped Baby Jesus in the manger.

Isaiah also spoke of wonderful gifts coming from Arabia: **the wealth of the nations shall come to you. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.**

Christians believe this particular prophecy about Jerusalem was fulfilled by the visit of the wise men in Bethlehem, (the focus shifted from Jerusalem to our Savior) whose story is told in our gospel reading (Matt 2:1-12). Matthew tells us **wise men came from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews?** These wise men saw the bright light of a star and followed it in search of a baby who would be King. Matthew's wise men came to be called "kings" by early Christians based on another of Isaiah's prophecies, **nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.**

Whether they were wise men, kings or astrologers, as some say they were, they found the Baby Jesus under the great light of God's glory. And, when **they saw the young child with Mary his mother, they fell down, and worshipped him, and they presented to him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh,** gifts appropriate for the Savior of the world.

These were normal gifts presented to earthly kings: myrrh as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume and gold as something of great value. But they also have a spiritual meaning; especially when we consider our Lord's heavenly origin and his purpose in coming in the body of a man. The gold still signifies an earthly king, but the frankincense, or incense, is symbolic of God or divinity. Myrrh was used in anointing, but also as an embalming oil, so it pointed to our Lord's death on the cross.

When the wise men came to Jerusalem seeking the new King, Herod was alarmed; and after he was told of the ancient prophecy from the Book of Micah, that **out of Bethlehem shall come a Governor that shall rule Israel,** he sent the wisemen there, instructing them to **bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.**

If we consider the wise men to actually be kings, we have sharp contrasts between three types of rulers. The wise men simply sought to pay homage to a special King who would later sacrifice his human body for all mankind. The third king, Herod, desired to pay homage to no one, and was not about to sacrifice himself for anyone. In fact, he had already proven he would do anything to preserve his power and authority as an earthly king by executing his three oldest sons and one of his wives.

He was ruthless and did not want to worship Jesus, he wanted to slay Him. God's salvation plan was in jeopardy, but the wise men, **being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, departed into their own country another way.** God spoke to them giving them guidance and wisdom in a dream.

God still speaks to his people, and it may be through dreams, but is more likely to come through other media. Consider the case

of St. Paul. As a devout Jew, he was travelling to Damascus to arrest Christians, but on the way, **a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice;** it was the voice of Jesus who called Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. After his conversion, Paul said in Galatians that he spent three years in Damascus and Arabia communing with the Holy Spirit.

In our epistle reading (Ephesians 3:1-12), Paul refers to this time of reflection and meditation when he said through the grace of God **by revelation he made known to me the mystery of Christ which in other ages was not made known.** Those, like Paul, who had a good knowledge of the ancient Scriptures could now look on them and say, “Oh, so that is what the prophet Isaiah was talking about!”, or, “Now I see what God intended!”

Paul said this revelation about Messiah/Jesus **is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.** After Jesus was resurrected and just before He ascended back to heaven, He promised to keep in touch with his disciples by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit that He would send to them.

It was the Holy Spirit that revealed to Paul the truth about the part of God’s salvation plan Isaiah foresaw, the visit of the foreign kings suggested, and that Jesus symbolized through several of his healings. **The Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ.** More than any other New Testament author, Paul emphasized the fact that all who accept Jesus as their Savior, regardless of nationality or past religious beliefs, are equal members of Christ’s Church.

St. Paul gives hope to all who are unsure that their faith will save them, or even strengthen them; and he gives a great example for those who are most secure in their walk with Jesus. By this time, he had many great accomplishments expanding the early church and documenting the basics of our Christian faith. In spite of his successes, he called himself **less than the least of all saints.** Compare Paul’s attitude to that of Herod; Paul is full of godly knowledge and wisdom, but remains humble; being less worthy of God’s grace than the other apostles, and even all other believers.

He is humble because he knows he **was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God**, he knows Jesus is the source of his knowledge and wisdom. He does not want to enlarge his holdings or protect his “exalted” status as an apostle, he wishes only to share the blessings of God’s saving grace. He knows his own power is not the source of his prolific teaching and accomplishments, he knows he received them because they are in line with God’s ultimate and eternal purpose. (as are our calling)

Before anything was made, God had an ultimate and eternal purpose for his creation; and every period of time contributed to that purpose. When we consider that you and I are part of God’s eternal plan and purpose, we may tend to be a little prideful, especially in comparison to those we may call “modern day Gentiles,” those who have not yet accepted Christ as Savior.

To this thought we must remember two things; first, a ministry we support through our Missions Committee, The Voice of the Martyrs, reports that even radical Muslims who have persecuted Christians have been brought to faith in Jesus Christ by those who they persecute. Isaiah’s prophecy of Gentiles turning to the God of Israel is still coming true, so pray for them!

Second, though we are part of God’s grand design for the universe, his purpose came to fruition only through **Christ Jesus our Lord**; and Paul said it is through **faith in him**, and the working of the Holy Spirit within us that we **have boldness, and access, with confidence** to God the Father.

We have confidence and boldness in our assurance of everlasting life only through our faith in Jesus Christ. Because of our Lord’s sacrifice, God’s purpose is fulfilled and we experience communion with Him through his Son. With love and faith, we can speak to God through our prayers, and we can commune with Him because we have been saved as a result of his eternal salvation plan.

And that is worth much more than all this world’s gold, or power, or earthly kingships! Like Paul, let us share this blessing

because wise men still seek Him! People are still searching for answers, and Jesus Christ is THE answer.

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.