



January 7, 2007

The Light

It is the sermon of the light. This Sunday we are celebrating Epiphany, though it actually took place yesterday. January 6th is the date that has been set for this celebration, just as December 25th is set for Christmas. What exactly is Epiphany? The word itself means manifest, or to make known. Epiphany is when we celebrate the baby Jesus being made known to those outside the Jewish world. It's really a remarkable event, because the Jewish people expected the Christ to be a worldly king or Messiah, a man of royalty who would deliver them from the Romans and establish a new world kingdom centered in Jerusalem. What makes it even more interesting is that the story of the wise men is found in the Gospel of Matthew. Each Gospel was written with a purpose and a target audience. Matthew writes in a way to appeal to the Jewish people. He does this by appealing to Jewish prophecies. He begins right away in Chapter 1 when he quotes Isaiah 7 verse 14. He says, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emanuel, which means "God with us." As we shall see in Chapter 2, he continues to quote the prophecies.

In Matthew Chapter 2 verse 6, the wise men come to Herod and they ask, "Where is he who was born King of the Jews?" Herod wants to know where this is so he calls in the scholars and they tell him, "In Bethlehem and Judea, for this is what the prophet has written. But you Bethlehem and the land of Judea are by no means least among the rulers of Judea. For out of you will come a ruler who will be the Shepherd of my people Israel." He quotes Micah 5 verse 2. Then nine verses later in Chapter 2 verse 15, When Mary and Joseph have to flee to Egypt, Matthew says, "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the Prophet, out of Egypt have I called my Son," Quoting Josea verse 1. And then just a couple verses later Matthew 2 verses 17 and 18, he says, "Then what was said through the Prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah,

weeping in great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted.”

A direct quote from Jeremiah 31 verse 5 as Herod had all the male babies 2 years old and younger killed. Five verses later in Matthew 2 verse 23, Matthew writes, “So was fulfilled what was said through the Prophets. He will be called Nazarene.” A Nazarene at the time is a person who was despised. Isaiah 53 verse 3 says He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not. What makes this so interesting is that while Matthew stresses the fulfillment of prophecy, which is appealing to his audience of faithful Jews, Matthew is also the one who begins his Gospel with the Gentile Magi or Wise Men, coming to worship, and Matthew's Gospel ends with the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations, which is also the fulfillment of another prophecy. Isaiah 42 verse 6, which says “I the Lord have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand, I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.”

So what is today, we celebrate Epiphany, the story of the Wise Men following the light, the light mentioned in Isaiah 42 verse 6, the light of the world, Jesus Christ. And so we read in Matthew Chapter 2 verse 1, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold Wise Men or Magi of the East came to Jerusalem.” Who were these Wise Men from the East, and what exactly is or was a Magi? Well I have to tell you, there's a remarkable story about them.

This remarkable story says that they were 3 astronomers from the East with the names of Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar. One of them was from India, one was from Greece, and the other was from Egypt. According to the tradition, they were baptized later by doubting Thomas. And through a whole series of rather miraculous events, they ended up being buried at the Great Cathedral in Cologne, Germany. That's the remarkable story, or we can go with what we know for sure.

First of all, we know that the word Magi has an Iranian origin. Iran, please remember, was originally known as Persia, or Med. The name Magi comes from the name of one of the elite priestly and noble tribes of the Med's. They were called the Magus, which means “great.” The Magus, or Magi, were deeply interested in

religion, the study of stars, and other areas of human interest. They were monotheistic, worshipping only one God, the God of Creation. They were considered to be great men, wise men, because they had knowledge, much like the magicians or wise men spoken of in Daniel.

They were individuals who Nebakanezer looked to for advice. These were the individuals who Daniel himself was put in charge of. Now of course, Daniel was in Babylon, which is modern day Iraq. What we do know is that when we look at both Iraq, which was Babylon, and Iran, which was Persia or Mead, both home to wise men or Magi, both of them are East of Israel. And we do know that the Jewish people, like Daniel, were carried off into captivity in both places. This is probably how the wise men knew that there would be a "Star of Judah." Numbers 24 verse 17 says, "I see him but not now. I behold him but not near. A star will become of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel." This is prophesied by Balaam. Whether it was this star of Judah that they were looking for or the light of the world spoken of by Isaiah, we don't know. But we do know some very wealthy, noble, priests who had heard the prophecies of the Messiah see a new star in the sky and they determined that it is the star of Judah, or the Messiah. So what do they do?

Well we see in the very next verse, they go to Jerusalem and they ask, "Where is the one who is born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the East and have come to worship Him." Worship- give worth to the Savior of the world. They do this with four gifts, and yes you heard me right. Four gifts, gold; gold the metal or element of kings. Gold is mentioned throughout scripture. Joseph, who was second in command to the Pharaoh, wears a gold chain, as does Daniel who was also second in command to Nebakanezer. We see kings and queens coming to meet with King David and King Solomon, they have gold crowns, gold scepters. In fact, Solomon himself has an ivory throne that is overlaid with gold. He even has golden drinking cups. The Magi bring gold; it is the most precious metal. It is the metal of kings, it is the metal of Jesus, the King of Kings, deserves. And knowing that he is the light to the gentile, he is deserving of it because his salvation is precious to them.

Then there is frankincense. Pure incense that was used only for the worship of God. We see this in Exodus 30 verse 34. It was stored in a special chamber in the temple and used in the meal offerings, where it was mixed with the grain that was offered up to give it a pleasing smell. It was also used in the prayers, symbolizing as the

smoke from the burning incense rose, the people's prayers also would rise to God. They symbolized that the people's prayers were pleasing to God, just as the incense was pleasing to smell. The wise men brought Frankincense because Jesus is the Son of God. That which is reserved for God is given to Him.

They bring Myrrh, which was primarily a perfume, and was used on basically three occasions. First, for a wedding to make the bride smell sweet. Second, it was often mixed with wine to for anesthetic to relieve pain. And third, it was used in embalming to cover up the smell of decaying flesh. The wise men brought myrrh because Jesus came to make the church his bride, through his death and resurrection. Myrrh, which Jesus refused at his crucifixion, because only his blood could cover the pain of sin. Myrrh, because he would die and his body would be prepared for burial.

Though we all know that the wise men Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh, I said there was a fourth gift. It's one that's just not mentioned out right. It's the gift of time. But notice this tremendous gift. These wise men were very rich. They didn't just cut a check and drop it in the mail. Now I know you might be saying "Ok Matt they didn't have check then and the United States Postal Service wasn't invented yet, in fact there was no FedEx or even UPS. But people with nobility had servants, and they could have easily sent a caravan with their gifts. In fact, this would have been normal for paying the tribute to a king. But not these Magi. They got up, took the very best they had, and they traveled between 500 and 1000 miles one way, to worship the King. And isn't that why we are here today? We are not here because Church is a social club or a service organization. The church is the bride of Christ, and we come to honor Him, and worship Him, just as the wise men of old did.

As we go into this New Year, I encourage you to keep on doing this. Don't fall prey to the old, "Oh, I'll just write a check and drop it in the mail." No, come and give your time. It's more than offering Gold, and Frankincense and Myrrh. It's offering your self. Be like the wise men, come and worship. Bring a friend, and come and worship. Bring family who has fallen away. Come and worship, worship the very light of the world, which brings light into the darkness, and bring salvation to our doors.

In our saviors name, Amen.