

Feast of the Epiphany – January 4, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-12

"Listen, Trust and Obey"

On Christmas we celebrated the birth of Jesus, and the Angels appearing to the Shepherds. On New Year's Day God's one Holy and Apostolic church celebrated The Holy Name of Jesus and the circumcision of Jesus – following the Law of Moses as decreed by God that every male must be circumcised on the eighth day following his birth and it is then that He was named as the angel had proclaimed - Jesus. Following that Jesus was taken by Joseph and Mary to be presented before the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem. Remember that Bethlehem is only about 8 miles from Jerusalem, so that was not too long a trek for the family.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ." "Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required," "Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:" ""Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace." "For my eyes have seen your salvation," "which you have prepared in the sight of all people," "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."" (Luke 2:22-32) God had given to Simeon eyes to see the Savior as an infant – whom Simeon had prayed for his whole life – and to see Him before he died. Please remember that the word “Christ” comes from the Greek word “Christos” which means Messiah. It is also important to remember that the visit from the “wise men,” the Magi had not yet happened.

In today's Holy Gospel from Matthew chapter 2 we read of a group of men who are described as “Wise men.” These men are often named Wise Men, Magi, or Three Kings – as we sang about this morning. In Matthew 2:1 we read *"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem" "and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.""* Sometime after the birth of Christ these “wise men” entered Jerusalem – while following the star.

The term Magi – which we have let morph into “Wise Men and Kings” comes from the Greek μάγος “magos” which means *a Magian, or an (Oriental) astrologer, a magician; a caste of wise men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science.* For this reason the King James Version refers to the Magi as “Wise Men” presumably to detract from the magician or follower of the occult that could be drawn from the word “magic.”

Many times we hear these men referred to as “The Three Wise Men.” There is actually no evidence to support this idea. There were 3 wonderful gifts that were offered - but there could have been 2, 20, or 200 wise men – no one knows for sure! There are some who believe that the “Wise Men” were a group of astronomers from the Mesopotamia area. Their names appear nowhere in the Scriptures, but western religious tradition name them as Melchior - a Persian scholar; Caspar – an Indian scholar; and Balthazar – an Arabian scholar. Syria, Armenia and Eastern churches attribute other names and countries of origin. These foreign noblemen, as

was the custom for visiting dignitaries to see the King of the region, visited Herod and asked for information concerning another King – *‘The King of the Jews.’* That must have hit Herod right where he lived – because he had been appointed as king of the Jews by the Romans.

There is something very important for us to understand- and that is when these men appeared to meet the Lord. They did not find *“the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.”* In the Gospel, Jesus is referred to as *“the child.”* *“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.”* (Matthew 2:9) These visitors from the East were led miraculously to the very place where the young Jesus was. *“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”* (Matthew 2:11) they did not go to the stable – but to a house.

There is also more evidence regarding the length of time that passed from His birth, found in Herod’s attempt to destroy Christ. Herod had all male children, in Bethlehem, who were under 2 years old slaughtered. Matthew 2:16-18 clearly states *“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”* *“Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:”* *““A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”* (Rachel was a wife of Jacob – and her tomb in in Bethlehem.)

What we have here is a vicious King bent on destroying all of these children. *“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”* *“When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.”* *““In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:”* *““‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”* *““Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.”* *“He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.””* (Matthew 2:3-8) What a lie – and what deceit – he did not want to go and worship the Lord – but to annihilate Him!

For all of the historical good that Herod did in his refinishing the Temple and his many projects like building Masada and other fortresses – he was a real maniacal madman! He wanted to know where the King was born as foretold in God’s Word - Micah 5:2 *““But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”* How can a baby be from “ancient time?” Only God can do that – only God can be that! Isn’t it interesting that the Jewish leaders knew the prophecies but dared not go and see for themselves? Instead we have a group of Gentiles who were willing to cross a desert, to follow a

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star, to offer gifts, to offer worship! After conferring with the scribes and Chief Priests, Herod sent these visitors from the east to Bethlehem to search diligently for the child. Herod pretends that he desires to worship the King of the Jews as well.

The “Wise men” go to visit the Savior: *"After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was." "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh." "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."* - (Matthew 2:9-12)

God leads these men with this star - directly to where Jesus is. They fell down before the Lord and offered Him - Gold, incense and Myrrh. After a time of worship, God warns these men of Herod's plan to destroy the Christ child, to destroy Jesus and as a result the family and the magi depart another way – as the family fled to Egypt as they were shown in a dream. God was trying to show these men something special and they were blessed to observe the Savior first hand – and the world NEEDS a savior! Today God is doing the very same thing. Like Simeon and the Magi, God wants people to see His son for who He is ...THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD! God opened their eyes and He opened their hearts! These men fell down when they saw Jesus and they worshipped Him.

Unfortunately, there are many people today who see God at work all around them and actually know that it is God who is working, but they are indifferent and they just don't care. They may be naval gazing, or so wrapped up in themselves. There are many who really do believe that Jesus is Savior and the ONLY way to heaven... but they refuse to open their hearts! And then there are those that completely deny that Jesus is the ONLY WAY. We come from that way – we walked away from that way because of that belief. We stood on the fact that Jesus is the “the way, the truth and the life” and we were not going to be manipulated to think otherwise. How absolutely tragic that people cannot open their hearts to understand who Jesus Christ is – and what He brings! We need to pray for those who do not think Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, or they think that Jesus is something else. We need pray for their hearts to be transformed; that the Holy Spirit will reveal Himself to them and change their hearts and their lives forever.

Something else happened with these visitors from the East - they opened their treasures - and when they had opened their treasures, they presented them to Jesus: gold, and incense, and myrrh. What a picture of humility in these men. - *“they fell down, and worshipped him”* There is something that is very special about humbling yourself and bowing before almighty God! These men humbly bowed and offered valuable, precious gifts to a young child and Jesus was worthy to receive these gifts.

- They gave Him gold for He is the King of Kings.
- They gave Him incense, or as we have commonly have referred to it as frankincense which represented Him being the High Priest of High Priests.

- Lastly, they gave Him myrrh, which represented the extreme sacrifice that Jesus would make on our behalf, as a remarkable act of love, dying on the cross – taking our punishment.

They gave Him gold, frankincense and myrrh. All three were expensive gifts that they gave to this young King, willingly, humbly, gratefully as an act of faith!

There are some accounts that these men followed the star for approximately 2 years. You talk about a road trip and what a picture of faith! They obediently followed a light in the sky not knowing how long the journey would be; not knowing what they would encounter along the way. They did not know exactly what they would find when they reached their destination. Regardless of what the journey held, they followed God, relying on Him. And that is exactly what we must do! We must rely on God! We need to be following a God given direction; not knowing how long our journey will be; not knowing what we will encounter along the way; but we trust God! Like these wise men and Mary and Joseph, we must, as a church and as a people of God - listen to the direction God has given us. We must follow him! Sometimes when He gives us direction - it may not be so easy to listen, trust and obey. But we must be like these very wise men and listen, trust, and obey Him!