**Matthew 2:1-12 January 2, 2022**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson. Matthew chapter 2 here re-reading these words. “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season, but ironically this season that comes after Christmas is most often identified by its gifts. The magi come and give Mary and Joseph 3 gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts were extravagant and special; gifts fit for a king. Epiphany is usually remembered for those gifts brought by the magi or wise men. They are the main figures to come out of epiphany and we remember them even during the Christmas season. We like to include them in our manger scenes and we even let a few epiphany hymns sneak into Christmas like “We Three Kings”. While these may be the famous characters of Epiphany the truth is we don’t have a ton of specific information about these men. We know that being magi they were advisors of great kings and that they came from a distant land. We know that they were seers of the stars and recognized the star that guided their way to Jesus. We also know that they brought 3 special gifts. But we don’t know how many there were, their true intentions, or even if they had a saving faith in Jesus as Savior or just simply saw him as a prophesied King. While we don’t know much about the magi, another figure here in Matthew chapter 2 is very well known both here in Scripture and in secular history. He, like the magi, is a Gentile, he recognizes Jesus as a King, and seems to have a similar reaction to news of the prophesy being fulfilled and the appearance of the star; to go and worship this king once he finds out where he is, but rather than bringing his gifts and worship, there are evil intentions in his heart. While Epiphany is a celebration in the Church of the true light of the world, instead of focusing on the unknowns of the Magi, today we see the true character of King Herod, the man who sought not to radiate the light of Jesus, but instead who hoped to snuff it out.

Herod isn’t a very happy figure of Christmas and Epiphany, we don’t find him in our manger scenes and there are no happy Christmas Carols about him. The truth is Herod wasn’t only feared and despised today as we look back on history but he had a horrible reputation at the time of his rule as well. Matthew goes into detail to explain how Herod’s reaction affected all of Jerusalem. The magi come to Herod and ask “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.” “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him.” Matthew is helping us the reader understand that if Herod wasn’t happy, no one was happy. That Herod’s mood affected the lives of his entire kingdom.

Herod was a man who was not a Jew but an Edomite, making him an outsider of the people who he ruled. He was paranoid, violent, greedy, and manipulative. He was a murderer, not just of innocent civilians but even members of his own household including his wife and his own children. He is remembered for attempting to kill Jesus as a child, and ultimately slaying innocent children in Bethlehem in the slaughter of the innocents. In Herod we see the desperation of man when their power is threatened. We see the effect of sin in the heart of mankind, in that someone could be so corrupted that they would order the slaying of children. We see sin itself personified, and sadly, we see ourselves, even on this joyous celebration of the true light of the world.

Upon hearing that one who had been born King of the Jews Herod was troubled. And why wouldn’t he be? After all he was the one sitting on the throne as ruler over the Jewish people, yet he was a fraud. He didn’t know anything about the prophesy of a Savior, he had to consult with chief priests and scribes to find out where Jesus was to be born. He had to ask the magi when the star first appeared. Herod was a false king who sat upon a false throne. When he heard that he could be confronted with the true King of the Jews he set out to destroy this threat once and for all. He would do anything to avoid being exposed for the fraud that he was.

While we focus on the gifts of Epiphany, and the characters of Epiphany the truth is Epiphany is all about the light. Even here in the description of the events between Herod and the magi we see that Herod was doing everything he could to stop the light from exposing the truth. That’s where the comparison comes in when it comes to Herod and us. The light of Jesus Christ was so powerful, radiant, and pure that it exposed and destroyed every last bit of darkness in the world. It was like a pure white spotlight in the middle of a field that exposes everything that was there. The truth is, like Herod, we are frauds in our own lives when we believe that we are righteous and pure on our own. That we are holy based on the things that we do. That we are better in some way than those who are around us. The truth of God’s Word shines into our hearts and exposes the darkness that is there. And our first inclination is very similar to that of King Herod. We don’t accept this truth and come to God in repentance, but instead we set a plan into motion. We think of ways to avoid the exposure of this light and shut it down right from the start. We start to build up excuses and anger. We listen to the evil in our hearts.

Herod was troubled by the news of a threat to his throne, but immediately went to work figuring out what he could do to destroy this king. He doesn’t ask the magi about the timing of the star appearing by coincidence, but he’s zeroing in on how old this king would be. He doesn’t send the magi to Mary and Joseph to find Jesus for the reason he gives, but we see his intent to kill the King when he orders the slaying of all the boys in Bethlehem ages 2 or younger. He was cold and calculated and would do anything to avoid losing his power and being exposed.

In the same way we set out with plans to avoid being exposed for our sin. We set out in ways to keep our sin hidden from those around us. We avoid the light of God’s Word by neglecting to come and hear it, or study it with our families in devotions or on our own. We instead give in to the darkness of the world around us and chase after every evil desire of our heart. When we are confronted with our sin we lash out in anger, or immediately start planning ways that we can get out of taking responsibility for what we have done by making excuses or dismissing the true evil darkness of sin in our lives.

But no matter what Herod did, the light remained and only grew stronger. Herod wasn’t successful in killing the true king of the Jews when he was a child and just coming into the world. In the same way all of our plans and schemes to avoid the light of Christ and the Word of God are eventually laid to waste. The darkness can’t possibly have fellowship with the light and so the dark deeds are exposed. We see the truth of our sinfulness. We are confronted and exposed for the sinners we are, here in this place, here in the mirror of the Law which says “Be perfect or be condemned”. If we choose to remain children of darkness, and refrain from a true confession of our evil and sin then we will be chased away and thrown away like the night is when the sun rises. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

For Herod there was no greater thing in this world than the power he could wield over others. But the other characters of the Epiphany show their true wisdom in the fact that they come to the house of a child and bow down before him offering special and extravagant gifts, fit for a king. While we may not have all the details of the magi and may know more about Herod in history, we have this truth for certain, they understood that Jesus was a king. Their joy upon finding him is so great that Matthew describes that they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” There was joy in the light that they had found, and in the presence of that blinding and pure light of the very Son of God, they bow down and worship. That’s what Epiphany is all about, being in the presence of the true light of the world. A recognition of who Jesus is and why he came. A continuation of the celebration of the Christmas gift by seeing Jesus illustrated to us in a new way. For he wasn’t only a gift, he wasn’t only just a baby born and placed in a manger, but he was himself the light. The light that dispels the darkness. The light that exposes the evil. The light that destroys the darkness of sin and drives it away so that all remains is the exceeding joy of being forgiven.

You are bathed in that light today. You are in His presence here in His house. That light continues to shine in all of our hearts as we are made temples of the Holy Spirit that resides and lives inside of us. We are bearers of his light to a world of darkness. We, who for a time hid from his presence and from the true light, or schemed to remain in the darkness of sin, now take his light to those dwelling in darkness and show them the truth. That they too are sinful, but that they too are saved. Epiphany is a reminder of the amazing gift of salvation that was given to the Gentiles, as we see the Gentile magi bowing down before Jesus. As Paul describes in our epistle lesson: “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ….This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This great mystery shows the love of Jesus Christ, that you and I, as Gentiles, have been saved by the true king of the Jews. May we remember that truth throughout these days of light in the season of Epiphany. May God bless us and bathe us in his light now and always as we celebrate his victory over darkness and his presence with us in our hearts and in his house.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.