**Matthew 2:1-12 January 5, 2020**

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

Our text for the observance of the Epiphany of our Lord comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2 here re-reading these words. “After listening to the king, they went on their way. 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. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Epiphany is the bookend of the Christmas season. Today is the last day of the 12 days of Christmas and tomorrow is actually Epiphany. We are observing it today as we come together for worship as a means of transitioning between seasons, as we look to a return to “normal” after the strange weeks that happen around Christmas and New Year’s Day. When you aren’t quite sure what day of the week it is or when that party was, or if a business will be open during their regular hours. Epiphany is the end of all of that. It was a tradition in the Sherry house that Epiphany was a day for taking down the Christmas decorations. There is even a tradition in the church that for a proper observance of Epiphany you would burn your Christmas tree and sing Christmas carols and hymns one last time.

These traditions are fine and proper, but it also means that Epiphany may bring this empty sort of feeling like it’s the end of the party. Imagine if the only celebration you had of the Christmas season was Epiphany. You’d be arriving to the party as everyone else was leaving. It reminds me of an experience I had where I was hurrying to a Confirmation party for a student and arrived as they were taking down the tables and decorations. All the other guests were gone, and only the family was there putting things away. There were a couple of pieces of cake left that they had wrapped up in plastic and they got one out for me, left a chair out and I sat and ate the cake by myself as they were cleaning and getting ready to go. As I gave them the card and wished them well we both were walking out to our cars and they had turned out the lights. It didn’t feel like much of a party and celebration.

Which in a way must have been the experience of the magi or wise men. Where was the party? They show up to Herod’s palace 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?” Everyone would be celebrating this momentous birth, right? Everyone would have seen the star, known the prophecy, and be heading out to worship and celebrate! Especially the guy in charge, King Herod! They show up expecting to be pointed in the direction of the celebration and are met no doubt with a puzzled look, and then a troubled look, by a man who would not have wanted to hear news of another ruler at all. Not only had King Herod not been celebrating or worshipping, he was oblivious to a star or one who was going to be born king of the Jews. It wasn’t the end of the party, there was no party. Like showing up to someone’s house on the wrong night. There are no cars there, there’s no noise inside the house, you’re left puzzled, confused, and troubled. You probably would simply just turn around and head back home.

In a way couldn’t that be a description of the Christian Church today? Is the party going strong with fanfare and celebration and enthusiasm? Or does it feel like the party is over? You walk into a church and look around on a Sunday morning. Is Christianity booming? Is Lutheranism? In Onekama? In Michigan? In the United States? The answer is no. You can look at the state of the synod report in the Lutheran Witness that they put out every year, you can look at demographic studies put out on the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod’s Website, you can find the exact numbers and data of this, but you also can just look around at our community, or even your own family. The days of it being socially understood that you were part of a church community are over. The days of there being perks to being a Christian are over. In that sense if someone were exploring becoming a member of a church they could arrive and feel that the party is over when they walk through those doors. And they could drive into the parking lot, look around, and be tempted to just drive away. Like arriving at a house where you thought there would be a celebration and finding nothing but darkness.

But we find a party and celebration on Epiphany, even though it may be the end of our Christmas celebration. Because undeterred by everyone else being troubled the wise men continue, and are sent to Bethlehem for the wrong reasons by King Herod, but they still go and see the star again, and rejoice. Rejoice with the greatest joy you can rejoice with, “When they saw the star they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” Now that’s party language! That’s Christmas morning joy, that’s the height of earthly joy, and all over seeing the star. Because the star led them to the King, the true King, and they go to the house, where Mary and Jesus are, it’s such a non-party Joseph isn’t even recorded being there. He may have been off working at the time or present just not named, but gone are the shepherds, the angels, all the rest of the nativity scene. You really could have your own separate Epiphany scene of Mary and an older Jesus in a house, and the magi, whether 3, 4, 5, we don’t know the exact number, coming and presenting Jesus with the gifts. But even though there wasn’t a royal entourage, a royal throne, a long line of people waiting to present this true King gifts befitting of his power and authority, the wise men still have joy, still celebrate, and still fall down and worship *him.* It didn’t matter that no one else was there, it didn’t matter that no one else had understood the sign, because later on in the life of Jesus Christ, the same king, the same Messiah, the same Savior, had crowds see him who were so numerous, to even get to Jesus they had to lower a man through the roof of a house. To even speak to all of them, Jesus went out in a boat and spoke to all of them gathered on the shore. For their sake, since there were so many and it would be impossible to feed them, Jesus’ disciples beg Jesus to send them away to their homes to find something to eat.

My dear friends in Christ, the party of celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ is ending. The party of social and cultural significance of it being “cool” to be a Christian is over. But don’t let that take away your joy, and don’t let it drive you away to another fad or any other celebration that the world may tempt you with. Because the truth is, that if you are a Christian only because of the perks it can bring to your life here on Earth you aren’t a Christian at all. Like crashing a party just because you were driving by and saw a lot of people there, but not knowing the host or even the reason for the celebration. You were only drawn to attend because of the free food and the free drinks. That’s not a true and lasting faith because it’s oblivious to the reason for the celebration. Instead of seeing your faith as just simply something you were born into, or that you do as a hobby or tradition, recognize the example of the wise men, who saw the star and followed, even when no one else did. Who continued on their journey undeterred and had great joy in being in the presence of the true King of everything. And who gave gifts befitting of a king, gifts that would not have been given to just anyone, gifts that were given out of a proper understanding of who he was. See in their example your own failures, your sin, how you neglect the celebration here in God’s house, how you are easily deterred from coming and receiving from God. How you are troubled when you hear of anything threatening your way of life, or your world view, or your authority here on Earth as Herod was and the people. See your failures and have an epiphany of your own, a revelation of the love of God in your life.

A fitting end to the Christmas season, as you take down your decorations today, or whether you did already, would be to turn on in the background of your house the Christmas classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” That movie has become a staple of the celebration of Christmas, but did you know that when it came out in theaters back in 1946, it wasn’t considered a success? It actually ended up losing money because not enough people went to see it. This beloved and classic film was seen as a failure. Over the years the copyright for the film lapsed and it became public domain. This meant that because distributors could air it for very little it was shown throughout the 70s and 80s everywhere. And as people saw it, some for the first time, some again after all those years, it became a classic. And by the time the copyright was reestablished it was popular and beloved.

The love of God has never had a price on it, it’s never been about what you do to earn it, and it will never be about you being good enough for God to love you or send Jesus to die for you. It’s a free gift given by God to the entire world. The words of our Introit say, “I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations, therefore nations will praise you forever and ever.” Generations change, nations change, but God doesn’t change, Jesus doesn’t change, therefore the message doesn’t change and we don’t change the core teachings that our church was built on. People will be drawn to the truth, to the light of God’s love, as we reflect it through our lives, our actions, our care for them even if they don’t care for us. The wise men teach us that faith can be found in the most unlikely of places. So we press on and receive from God his amazing gifts long after Christmas has ended.

Celebrate one more day. Celebrate as you take it all down, as hard as that may be. If you want to burn the tree, be my guest, just be careful where and how you do it. If you want to leave the tree up for another week or two, that’s not some great and unforgivable sin. Celebrate at all points in the party of your life, just as we do here in the Christmas season and be reminded of the unchanging love of God in the example of the magi. “Wise men still seek him.” A phrase you can see downstairs on our banner, a phrase you hear around Christmas time, and a truth of the Word of God. They seek and find that their salvation has has been accomplished by the work of their Savior.

Amen.

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

Amen.