

What if you woke up today—and all that you had left—were the things that you thanked God for yesterday? Would you have anything? Would you have anyone? It's not a bad question. I fear we would all be minimalists—and hungry—and maybe especially penniless—not that we are doing pennies anymore.

Now, thankfully, God doesn't work like that. He is gracious and patient. He isn't legalistic about prayer. And it is as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Good news for all of us.

But we do have room for growth in this regard. Remember Paul does tell us to give thanks in all circumstances. He tells us to pray without ceasing. James calls us to recognize God as the Giver of all good gifts. And gratitude *is* something we offer to God—even while it is of great benefit to us. But it takes some discipline to pray—to thank God for what we have—just as it takes some discipline to *worship*.

This weekend, we *celebrate* the Epiphany of Our Lord. Technically, we are a couple of days early. This is just the 11<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. But we often slide the commemoration of Epiphany to the nearest Sunday. Trinity Lutheran here in town is hosting an Epiphany Evening Prayer service on Tuesday if you are so inclined.

It is interesting, the assigned reading for this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Christmas is from Luke 2, where we find Jesus at twelve years old at the temple. Here, after Joseph and Mary lose track of Him—and then search for Him, He says, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This is about more than where Mary and Joseph find Jesus. It is about where Jesus is found. We will come back to that idea at the end of the sermon.

There is an excellent devotion about Epiphany on January 6 in our *Celebrating the Saints* devotional. You will also find an introduction to the season in the back. The word Epiphany is connected to light—it literally means to *give light* or *shine upon*. The word is used twice in Titus 2—translated as *appeared* or *appearing*—and both usages connected to the coming of Christ.

Here, Paul says, "For the grace of God has *appeared*, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the *appearing* of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

Notice here that the appearance of Christ is connected to the rejection of ungodliness. And the embrace of a self-controlled godly life. It even brings us to worship our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ. This is what the True Light does. It is transforming. It heals our souls. It brings a response. And maybe we see this best in the wise men—the Magi that come to Jesus—at this first Epiphany.

In Matthew 2, we jump forward as much as two years from Jesus' birth. The Holy Family remains in Bethlehem. They must have had relatives there. And Joseph—as a carpenter—was always able to find work. He had something to offer—to his community—and more importantly—to Jesus.

We heard the end of Matthew 1 back on the fourth Sunday in Advent—as you remember. The chapter ended with Jesus’ Nativity—and Jesus received the name that the angel required. Now, this *Baby*—as He is called in the classic Nativity account in Luke 2—is a *Child*—a new term for Jesus in this story. He is older. Some time has passed.

The events of chapter two take place in the time of Herod the King—the one who calls himself Herod the Great. We talked about him last week. And as we have seen, he feels threatened by this Child who has been born King of the Jews.

But the people of interest in this account are *the Magi*. Our English Bibles call them *the wise men*. The term *Magi* gives us the English word *magic*. They were men of a priestly caste of the false eastern religions of the Persians and Babylonians. They would have practiced necromancy, divination, and astrology. Matthew tells us merely that were Magi who came from the East. And they were looking for the King of the Jews.

But more is going on here. Quite possibly they knew *something* of the Hebrew Scriptures. They may have been exposed to the Old Testament Prophets. Remember that not all the Jews returned to Judah after the Babylonian Captivity. And we know that Daniel had access to the Scriptures even as he was among the exiles. And Daniel was even numbered with the Magi in Babylon, even though his wisdom and religion were of a *very different* kind.

There are prophecies about a star lighting the way to the Messiah in the Old Testament. We get hints of this in our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah today. But all the way back in Numbers 24, we hear Balaam’s prophecy that connects a star to the coming King, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”

And even as the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, they ask Herod and the Jewish Scribes to direct them from the Scriptures about where the Christ was to be born. They look to Micah 5, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

If the Magi came from Babylon or Persia, they would have traveled as much as nine hundred miles. Imagine doing that on foot—or even worse—riding a camel. This was no Sunday afternoon road trip. It took them weeks—maybe even months—to arrive in Judea after seeing the star first back home.

And Scripture doesn’t give us a number for their group. The western tradition suggests three simply because of the number of gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The eastern tradition suggests twelve—the number of God’s people—along the lines of the Tribes—and the Disciples. They probably traveled with a much larger number of attendants, guards, and even traders for this long journey. But what I want you to notice is that it took them time. It cost them something.

The star led them as far as Jerusalem. But then, as they leave Jerusalem, the star reappears and leads the Magi six more miles to the Child in Bethlehem. We see that this was never some ordinary star. It was the supernatural guidance of God. Perhaps the star is even an angel of the Lord.

And get the Christmas card picture of the stable and manger out of your head at this point. That was more the experience of the shepherds. Remember that for the Magi, some time has passed. The holy family is in a house now. And that is where the Magi encounter Mary and the Christ Child.

This is certainly an interesting story—but the story has a point in Matthew—and it is about the worship of the Magi. These men are foreigners—they are not Jewish—they represent the historic enemies of God’s people with a false religious tradition that goes back to Babylon. And yet, their conversion is complete as they bow and worship before the Christ Child.

Now, when they left the East, they came with gifts fit for a King. And much has been made of these costly gifts. Gold is valuable. Frankincense has ties to worship. Myrrh was used as a perfume—and even used at burial.

Is there theological weight to these gifts? Absolutely. And these gifts will be necessary for the life God the Father has for His Son. But did the Magi leave the East knowing the full theological significance of what they would encounter in Bethlehem? Probably not. These were merely the best gifts they had to welcome the newborn King of the Jews—prophesied in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures.

But what strikes me most, is that upon arrival, they worship. We hear that their worship is marked by great joy. They bow down—they prostrate themselves before the Christ Child. They worship Him.

And this isn’t just the Greek word for *honor* or *appreciate*. It isn’t just acknowledging someone’s existence or importance. It is the word for the *veneration* of God. It is a clear principle in Scripture that God alone is to receive worship—not emperors—not the false gods of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, or Persians. Not celebrities, politicians, or professional athletes. Not even the Blessed Virgin Mary herself. And especially not ourselves.

Now, did these Magi fully grasp the two natures of Christ, justification and sanctification, or divine predestination? Probably not. Or, at least, not yet. Like all of us, their worship is far more than they understand.

But they respond to the light they are given in proper ways. They understand that this is God’s Messiah. They reject the foolish reaction of the Scribes, High Priests, and Herodians. They worship. And it costs them something. Although it gives them even more.

And this is something for us to know about worship too. We come to Church to receive. God gives us His Word—His Wisdom—His grace. We learn the truth and we have our sins atoned. We glory in His presence with us. Jesus is found in His Father’s House—in the Divine Service of the Church. This Service is an unveiling of the eternal present. The kingdom of Heaven exists in our midst. These are valuable treasures—and we just can’t get enough.

But worship is not some spiritual performance that we watch. The Sunday Divine Service is not a therapeutic session designed to meet our emotional needs. We don’t assess its value based on whether we left feeling inspired—or our favorite hymn was finally chosen.

It is a common reaction to look at the Sunday Service and ask, “Did I feel something?” “Did I get anything out of it?” And when these are our questions, the focus is no longer on Christ—it is on us. And when worship centers on the self—we are not transformed. Instead, we are reinforced in our impatience—in our consumer mindset—in our subtle expectation that everything valuable is a matter of my preference.

For us, worship is also ascetical. Now, I know we don’t use that word a lot. It just means that worship requires effort and discipline. It is participatory. It is something we practice. It costs us something.

Sure, we don’t have to travel 900 miles—but we do have to get here. We don’t bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh—although we could. We bring our offerings. We bring our effort. We sing. We chant. We pray. We think. We respond. We stay awake. We amend our lives. And most importantly, we listen. Worship requires discipline—the same kind of discipline that we see with the Magi.

Worship is also transformative. It draws us out of ourselves into communion with God. Our minds are renewed so we think God’s thoughts after Him. Our lives are renewed, as we begin to walk in ways that are pleasing to the Lord. We are healed of our sin—not by being catered to—or by finally getting what we want. Instead, we are healed by being reoriented—from ego to offering—from consumption to communion.

The Magi came as pagan wise men—full of superstition and delusion. But they were prime examples of all of us—needing the gifts that God would offer them in their encounter with Christ. And they respond with worship. They need what Jesus has come to bring. They begin to understand who He is. And they respond with faith—with worship that costs them something.

And they leave utterly transformed. They reject a political alliance with Herod. They put themselves at risk by ignoring his instructions. But they do so because they now have a new King. They serve Christ. And they take the good news of the Gospel back with them to the East.

I like the way Isaiah says it in our Old Testament reading today. And I will let his words serve as our conclusion. I hope these words resonate with you. I hope they point you to what God is doing at this very moment in the Divine Service—even as He was working in the lives of the Magi. And I hope they trigger the exact same response in us.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult... They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*