

"Lighted Signs"

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied to each of you as we begin yet another year of Grace - the precious time our patient God grants to this sinful earth. God grant us all a sense of urgency to work while it is day, for "night" is surely coming when no man can work. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

We have used the picture of light often in the Advent and Christmas season just completed. We use it once more on this Sunday before the Epiphany, for God's Word itself directs us to one last example, one final image of light in connection with the coming, revelation and work of Jesus Christ.

And yet here, in this final example, we learn a most disturbing truth, and it is from this truth that we too must learn – if we are to avoid the calamity suffered by those who came before. In a far simpler time, with far fewer sources of light, the vast majority of mankind simply missed or ignored one of the single most unique lights ever displayed. They missed this light even though it was displayed like no other in the history of mankind – a physical light which led to that one great Light sent by God to chase spiritual darkness from their human existence. Our text for this morning tells of the mysterious "Star of Bethlehem" and its significance not only to the people of that day, but also to us today. Our text is found in Matthew's Gospel, the Second Chapter:

^{ESV} **Matthew 2:1-12** *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "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." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷ ¶ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹*

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. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

So far our text. With awe and reverence we read these, the very words of God, and thank him for giving them to us. Desiring that they might shine the light of truth and comfort also into our own hearts we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

It is not all that uncommon to have many more questions than answers concerning things we read about in God's Word. We have been given the answers to the questions that really matter, but there is so much that we do not understand.

So too in connection with the Wise Men (or Magi) and "the Star," we have so many unanswered questions. Just to review, briefly: Contrary to most manger scenes, the Wise Men never visited Jesus in the stable when he was lying in a manger. They came long after Jesus was moved to a house in Bethlehem. Jesus wasn't a new-born at that time; he may have been almost two years old. We don't know the names of the Wise Men, how many came, exactly where they were from, their exact occupation, their nationality, or what happened to them after they returned to their homes.

What we need to recognize here, however, is that we can very often learn something from the *lack of information* in the Bible. When we are *not* told something - such as the history of Jesus' early life or some of the specifics concerning the Wise Men and the star - we can know that not only are these things unimportant according to God's plan for us, their very omission tells us to look elsewhere for God's message. We know very little about the Wise Men, yet the Holy Spirit chose to mention them and their visit to the young boy Jesus. So we need to ask, "Why?" The message must be broad or generic, rather than specific. That is, we ought to look in this text for a *general* truth, rather than a *specific* truth about *specific* individuals. Immediately we then see why this text is chosen for Epiphany Sunday. (To be precise, Epiphany actually begins on Wednesday of this week.) Epiphany, remember, means "*appearing*" or "*manifestation*." What was it that was

important about the Wise Men? Obviously not their names, occupations, or numbers, since we are told nothing of these things. What *was* important was their *race*. These men were Gentiles (the Jewish term for anyone who was not a Jew.) What do we know about the star? Nothing of how big it was, how bright, from whence it came or to where it went. Only that the Jews never seemed to pay much attention to it. It was, therefore, a lighted sign that God created especially for the Gentiles.

We live in a time when race and origin are not supposed to matter. We live in a country that emphasizes "*all men are created equal*." This explains, at least in part, why we have such a hard time relating to the Church season we are entering this week - Epiphany. The point is we find it hard to imagine that Christ could have come *only* for his own race -- the Jews. We find it ludicrous to imagine that any man could be excluded from salvation based only on what he could not help -- his ancestors or nationality. Yet in an effort to preserve their racial integrity - since the Messiah was to be born from the Jewish nation as a descendant of Abraham - God commanded his people, the Jews, not to intermarry with Gentiles. God would most certainly have been branded a "racist" according to the standards of today. Nothing uncommon here. God is also called sexist, self-centered, jealous, and cruel. All of which shows only how profound is man's misconception of God and of divine justice.

Epiphany is the revelation that Jesus came for sinners everywhere, not just for the Jews. Though we today take this for granted, there was not a single Apostle at the time of Jesus' resurrection who embraced the truth that Jesus came also for Gentiles. This understanding came to them only gradually and grudgingly. So we read in Acts how Peter was reluctant to go to the Gentile Cornelius. When he did go, the Church in Jerusalem required a report both from Peter and later from Paul regarding their ministry to the non-Jews. And in Acts 11 we read how, it seems again almost reluctantly, the Jewish Christians "***when they heard these things (Gentiles coming to faith) they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.'***"

Was this a reasonable assumption on their part - the idea that the Messiah would come only for the Jews? Not really. Many different prophecies had foretold the *universal* call of the promised Messiah. Our Old Testament Lesson this morning from Isaiah 60 is only one of many: (***Isaiah 60:3***) "***The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.***" Once again we see how easy it is to take God's will and God's truth and carry it one step too far. God did forbid marriage to Gentiles, but the Jews came to carry this one step further, assuming that

God also intended to exclude the Gentiles from salvation. This despite the fact that the Holy Spirit had often and clearly said otherwise in his Word.

The single greatest witness to the fact that God also meant to include the Gentiles in his Kingdom is his great "lighted sign" -- the Star of Bethlehem. That this star was intended for the Gentiles as a manifestation created especially for them (and through them for all non-Jews) is undeniable. The Wise Men had followed the star for many, many miles. When the Magi got to Jerusalem, the Jews seemed to know nothing about it. It is hard to imagine that they had not seen it, but either way it obviously had no impact on them. The *lighted sign* was there for them to see, but they did not *see* the sign (it had no immediate effect on them) because they lacked the eyes of faith. It took the Gentile Wise Men to explain to the Jews in Jerusalem the significance of the star, and then their reaction was... what? To "***be troubled.***"

Here is where our text starts to get personal. Here we ought to see the great truths our gracious God would impress upon our hearts and minds this morning. The star was a sign - a very obvious and flamboyant sign; and yet it meant absolutely nothing to those who failed to look at it with the eyes of faith. What then happened? That same incredible sign (intended to draw sinners to the boy Jesus) served only to "***trouble***" them. Could anything have been more effective in drawing the Magi to Jesus? Jesus called to these star gazers by giving them a sign and placing it exactly where they were sure to see it. Yet note well how this magnificent sign actually had a *negative* effect on the people of Jerusalem. Here we see, unmistakably, a sign of the times. Most Jews had long since given up trust in God's promise of a Savior. Lacking faith in that promise, even the most magnificent signs are easily ignored. You recall how John put it: (*John 1:1ff*) ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. ⁶ ¶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸ He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. ⁹ ¶ That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the***

world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.

What does this have to do with you and me? Everything, in every way. This text serves first as a warning for us. It points out the danger of those who allow their religion to become too superficial, too comfortable, too heartless and thoughtless. The Jews pretended to be all about the Promise, yet the passage of time had shifted their emphasis, their goals. The change undoubtedly came gradually, but over time the cumulative effect of the change was dramatic and profound – to the point that when the Fulfillment of their religion arrived, they missed it, ignored it, didn't want it, weren't interested. Worse than that, they actually searched the Scriptures to find clues about the Messiah *for the sole purpose of trying to kill him*. So profound was the evil that had grown in them.

You here today are Christians, which means – almost by definition – that you are not so much interested in how you can be brought to faith as you are about how to be *preserved* in the faith that is already yours. Our text therefore reminds us, as Christians, of the danger of "religious drift" – the danger of gradually and subtly being lulled to sleep and pulled almost imperceptibly from the faith that alone can save. Our text for this morning provides that necessary warning, if we will but look carefully with the eyes of faith. If we ourselves don't miss God's lighted sign.

Our text is also a stark reminder of the grace and mercy of our God. Marvel not only at how he called the gentile Magi from faraway lands in such a remarkable way, marvel too at the very fact that he did so. The message is clearly this: Gentiles are also welcome, which means that God loves also you. That great big lighted sign was for you and me – a divine pronouncement that *all* are called. It means that Jesus came to pay the sin debt over every single human being. To put it into even more personal terms, the Star of Bethlehem should serve as a reminder of God's love *for me*, of God's forgiveness for all of *my* sins.

The result of this insight, what we are to do with this information going forward, ought to be obvious. God now wants every single Christian to live as a lighted sign. The darkness has been driven from our hearts by the light of Jesus Christ. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus. This we know, and it is news we are never supposed to cover over or keep to ourselves. The world around us is full of lost and weary travelers, desperately in need of a light to guide them out of the darkness of their sin and unbelief. How will they be drawn to that place of safety, peace, and comfort if they never see the lights that are supposed to serve as their guides?

That means you and me. That's also why Jesus' all-encompassing command or exhortation just before he returned to his Father in heaven was for us to reflect the light that lives in us to those who still wander aimlessly in darkness. It was also why he instituted not a new law to save ourselves, but a "law of love" whereby we would reach out to save others. We can do so in no greater way than to reflect the light of Jesus Christ in our lives and to share with them the truth that alone leads to light and life. These are not dead slogans or trite, outdated phrases. This is truth, this is light, and this is life.

In the year to come, resolve then to be the lighted sign that God intended you to be. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 60:1-6** Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ² 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. ³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ⁴ Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

^{ESV} **Ephesians 3:1-12** For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-- ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ 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. ⁷ ¶ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Michael McEnroe, President

Head Organist: Eileen McEnroe

Michael Roehl, Pastor

Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

Epiphany Sunday – January 3, 2016

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 90 (Verses 1-3, 8) (Red Hymnal)

"Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raises"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Isaiah 60:1-6) Moths and other night insects are clearly not alone in being drawn to lights shining in the darkness. Human beings are too – in a variety of different ways and for a variety of different reasons. In our first reading, Isaiah paints a picture of Jesus Christ and the gospel he came to bring as the light that draws human beings from around the world to the Christian faith – as we also were drawn.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 121 (Supplement Page 42)

The Second Lesson: (Ephesians 3:1-12) While difficult for us to fathom, gentiles were not *entitled* to share in the salvation that Christ earned. For centuries it was believed that the Messiah would come not only from the Jewish race but for the Jews only. God had other plans, which is why he sent the Apostle Paul also to the gentiles. This is one reason we celebrate Epiphany, the revelation that Christ came for all mankind.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – (Supplement page 15)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 99 (Red Hymnal)

"Now Are the Days Fulfilled"

The Sermon – Matthew 2:1-12 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Lighted Signs"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 106 (Verses 1-4, 7) (Red Hymnal)

"The People That in Darkness Sat"

The Installation of the 2016 Church Council

The Offering

The Prayers of the Day followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 718 (Verses 1 & 5) (Brown Hymnal)

"O Jesus, King of Glory"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as many foreign countries. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Last Sunday (25) Average (47) Organ Fund (\$12,745)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Coffee/Fellowship Time
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Coffee/Fellowship Time
	-11:30 p.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – Pastor Wayne Eichstadt is considering the call to Gethsemane of Spokane, WA. Pastor Peter Evensen is scheduled to leave for India on Monday to begin his work there. Pastor David Koenig has agreed to return to India to work with Pastor Evensen during the acclimation process. Timothy Daub, a former pastor in the LCMS and WELS, has applied for colloquy in the CLC. Nominations are still open for a fulltime maintenance worker and a professor at Immanuel College, and applications are being accepted for the position of CLC Treasurer and General Business Office manager.

Undecorating – Those who can are asked to help take down the Christmas decorations this morning following the service.

Church Council – The Church Council is scheduled to meet next Sunday following the service. Please bring agenda items to the attention of President McEnroe.

Regular Schedule Resumes – Please note that as of this morning we have returned to our normal schedule, with Sunday School and Bible Class at 9am, and Confirmation Class and Midweek Bible Study on Wednesdays at 6pm and 7pm respectively.