

# "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 Epiphany Sunday, 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 distraction and 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, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> "'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.'" <sup>7</sup> ¶ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.**

This is God's Word. 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 much that we are not told and much more that we do not fully understand.

So too in connection with the Wise Men (or Magi) and "the Star," we have 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 those 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 then we see why this text is chosen for Epiphany Sunday. (The actual Day of Epiphany was Monday of this past 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 – although lately nothing seems to matter more. We live in a country that at least *used to* emphasize the belief that "*all men are created equal*." This explains, at least in part, why we have such a hard time relating to the Church season we entered 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 offensive to imagine that any man could be excluded from salvation based only on what he could not help – his ancestry 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, petty, and cruel. All of which shows only how profound is man's misconception of God, his grace, 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 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 miles. When they 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 all to see, but they did not actually 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 Gentile men 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 were easily ignored or disregarded. 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. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. <sup>4</sup> In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it... That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. <sup>11</sup> He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.***

What does all of this have to do with you and me? It serves first as a warning for us. It points out the danger of allowing religion to become superficial, comfortable, 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 that hung ominously 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 you*, of God's forgiveness for all of *your* 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, groping desperately in the darkness of unbelief and yearning for a light to guide them. 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 be the lights that shine in the darkness. It was also why he instituted not a new law to save ourselves, but a "law of love" whereby we would consider the unspeakable horror of dying in unbelief and to recognize that the greatest gift we could ever give to the world is to light that narrow path that leads to salvation. God grant us courage to reflect the light of Jesus Christ in our lives and to share with them the truth that alone saves. These are not dead slogans or trite, outdated phrases. This is truth, this is light, and this is life eternal.

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

<sup>ESV</sup> **Isaiah 60:1-6** Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Ephesians 3:1-12** For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-- <sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. <sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> ¶ 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. <sup>8</sup> 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, <sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, <sup>10</sup> so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup> This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

<sup>ESV</sup> **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, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> "'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.'" <sup>7</sup> ¶ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.



# ST PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH

BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

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**Epiphany Sunday – January 12, 2025**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 129

"Hail Thou Source of Every Blessing"

## 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) Night insects are clearly not alone in their attraction to lights shining in the darkness. Human beings are also so drawn – 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 8** (Supplement Page 27) (Read responsively)

**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 many 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 Nicene Creed *(Projected on Screens)*

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 127 *(Red Hymnal)*

"As with Gladness Men of Old"

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

"**Epiphany**"

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Prayers

## The Pre-Communion Hymn – 306 *(Stanzas 1, 4, 8) (Red Hymnal)*

"Lord Jesus Christ, Thou hast Prepared"

## The Preparation for Holy Communion *(Brown Hymnal page 17)*

## The Distribution

## The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving *(Brown Hymnal page 20)*

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn – 718 *(Stanzas 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 and around the world. 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 – Sunday (29) Average (40) Saturday (95)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service with Communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-6:00 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Bible Study
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-No Sunday school or Bible Class</b>	
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour

**CLC News** – Pastor George Dummann has returned the call to Faith of Manchester, MO. That congregation has now called Samuel Naumann, who has recently completed the re-entry process has been declared eligible for a call in the pastoral ministry of the CLC. Pastor Del Maas has returned the call to St. Stephen of San Francisco. That congregation has now called Pastor Paul Krause.

**A National Women's Retreat** (online only) is planned for Saturday, January 25 beginning at 11:00 a.m. Central time. The Theme is "Press Pause: Grace-full Stewardship." The scriptural foundation for the retreat is 1 Peter 4:10, "*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*"  
*Registration and more information can be accessed at: <https://tinyurl.com/PressPause25>.*

**Lay Service** – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to be out of town next weekend. A lay service will be held in his absence. There will also be no Sunday School or Bible Class. Midweek classes will not be affected.