

Sermon Series – Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on the Epiphany of Our Lord, January 6, 2013

The Rev. Dennis Whalen
Lighthouse Lutheran Church
Freedom, PA 15042

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm: Psalm 24

New Testament Reading: Ephesians 3:1-12

Gospel Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

In Christ, while knowledge is important, only true wisdom (applied knowledge) is beneficial

Today is the first day of Church season of Epiphany. The word, “epiphany”, has many different definitions. The first one that comes to my mind is best described as the moment when you have a sudden solution to a question or problem that pops into your mind. You have been pondering a problem for quite some time and suddenly something clicks in your head. “Ah-ha!! Eureka!” This is most certainly one definition of the word “epiphany”. However, for the Church, the word “epiphany” has a much different meaning. “Epiphany” is actually a manifestation of God and when we, in the Church, speak of the season of Epiphany we are referring to witnessed appearances of God. In the Greek Septuagint, specifically among the Apocryphal works of the Maccabees, the word epiphany was used when God showed Himself to Judas and his troops in battle.¹ In the New Testament, the word epiphany is used to describe the birth of Jesus,² the vision of the resurrected Christ³, and the second coming of Jesus Christ⁴. So, the Church season of Epiphany celebrates these glorious manifestations of God in Jesus Christ, but it is also more than that. As I mentioned earlier, an epiphany is that moment

¹ 2 Maccabees 15:27

² 2 Timothy 1:10

³ 2 Timothy 4:1

⁴ Acts 2:20

when something suddenly clicks in your head. As such, Epiphany is also a celebration of the world recognizing that God was indeed within their presence. The Jewish people were living in darkness and yet The Light came into their world and was manifested. Throughout the Holy Scriptures, we read that Jesus preached to people and ministered to their needs. Consequently, and by the grace of God, some of them had epiphanies. The Light of the world had turned on the light bulb in their heads. As I was putting the sermon together for this week I could not help to think about the name of our congregation, "Lighthouse Lutheran Church". What a special season it is for the people of Lighthouse Lutheran Church. It is not only special for us, because Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has turned our light on, but He is using us to be a light to the community we live in. Jesus uses His people to communicate His truths so that the Holy Spirit may enlighten those around us. In that sense, Epiphany must be a time for us to thank God for the light He gave to us when we first heard and understood, but it also a time for us to answer the question, "Why are we here?" We are called to be a light to the world and to spread that light all around us. The Light started in Bethlehem and then spread to Jerusalem and Judea and eventually all the world. Each and every one of us is a little lighthouse walking around spreading the "Good News" of Jesus Christ. This is a great time to celebrate the joy and gifts that God has given us in His Son.

Within our Gospel text today, we read the story of the Wise Men. Most people are familiar with this text, but as I read it I find a more subtle message that can often be overlooked. The message is that although knowledge is very important, it is not nearly as important as wisdom, which some may argue is applied knowledge. Knowledge is a

familiarity or acquaintance with something.⁵ Wisdom, on the other hand, is accepting knowledge as fact. Wisdom permits one to apply their knowledge and trust in it. For instance, one may know that the stove top is hot. He may feel the warmth coming from the burner or see the glowing red iron. However, if this knowledge is not applied and made useful, in other words, if he touches the stove top anyway, then the knowledge does the man no good. He is not wise, but foolish. This is the difference between knowledge and wisdom and this is what I want to focus upon today.

In today's text we have three very distinct groups or types of people. Our first is King Herod. I do not believe we grasp how much King Herod was hated. He was the King of the Jews as appointed by the Romans. The main problem the Jewish people had with King Herod was that he was not Jew. Herod was Idumaeon, which means he was from the region of Edom, and was appointed over the Jewish people by the Roman government. In addition to ethnicity, the Jewish people also feared him because he was very cruel. Herod ruled as a madman and a tyrant. He had great power and authority over all within his land. However, in our text today, Herod demonstrates that a lack of knowledge (ignorance) causes a man to be fearful of everything. In this case, Herod's ignorance was in the Holy Scriptures. He knew *of* the Jewish Scriptures, but he had no knowledge of what the Scriptures taught. Therefore, Herod was ignorant in the complete sense of the word. Now, into Herod's region come these strange men from the east. If you will permit, I am going to make a presumption here. It is my deduction that these men from the east must have dressed quite differently from the Jewish people at that time. In addition, these men come into the city rather abruptly and from out of nowhere,

⁵ Knowledge – acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles, as a form of study or investigation

at least from the point of view of the average citizen. Moreover, these men are searching for the King of the Jews. What might Herod's response have been? Perhaps he said, "Here I am! You found me!" The men from the east retort, "No, no, no. You are misunderstanding our request. We are seeking the real 'King of the Jews'". Put yourself in Herod's place. He is deeply troubled by what he hears. In fact, the Greek word used indicates intense distress⁶. Allow me to put this into an illustration you can understand. Imagine being in your workplace and someone unexpectedly walks in asked to speak to the President of your company. Your President comes forth and introduces himself to the visitor, but the visitor responds by saying he is seeking the "real" President of the company. Now, you may think this man off the street is a lunatic, but if there had been talk or rumors going around that a new President was coming sometime in the future, this would be very distressing for the employees and especially the President. Thus, Herod called together his advisors to see if they had any additional information about these visitors. Who are these people? What are they doing here? When we live a life without scripture, sometimes we can act just like Herod. He does not know the truth because he is ignorant. Although Herod seeks out knowledge from his advisors, he does so not to believe, but because he wants to have the upper hand on his enemies. In the book "The Art of War" by Sun-Tsu, the author advises to keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.⁷ This is precisely what Herod is doing in seeking information from the teachers of the Law. Herod is not interested in what the Law says so that he may believe, but he is interested in order to have the upper hand. He seeks knowledge

⁶ ἐταράχθη – of acute mental or spiritual agitation.

⁷ Some believe this quote is from the movie *The Godfather* while others believe it is from Machiavelli's "The Prince". I read "The Art of War" and, although the direct quote may not have come from Sun-Tsu's book, the guidance certainly is.

because he is ignorant. Paul writes to the Ephesians about a similar type of ignorance. In Paul's letter, he uses the word Gentiles, but the real focus of his message is on people who do not have the knowledge and belief of Holy Scripture. Paul writes, "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts".⁸ Christ came as a light for all mankind, yet there are those who harden their heart and refuse to believe the light. In other words, the light of epiphany ignited before their very eyes and they refused to acknowledge its presence.

If Herod demonstrates ignorance, then the Jewish leaders and teachers of the Law demonstrate knowledge without wisdom. Herod invites these religious teachers into his palace and seeks information from them concerning these visitors from the east. "Who are these foreigners within my streets? What are they looking for? A king? Where is this king to be born?" The Jewish leaders knew the Holy Scriptures inside and out. They did not have the luxury that we have today of carrying around Bibles. Today, any one of us can purchase a Bible in English for four or five dollars. We have access to God's Word unlike any generation before us via mobile applications and the Internet. The scribes, the teachers of the law, did not. If they were among the elite religious leaders, they probably had access to a scroll in the Temple. However, instead of carrying the Scriptures with them, they memorized God's Word. When Herod asked these probing questions about the coming King, the teachers of the Law knew the answers by heart. They inform Herod that the prophet writes that The King of the Jews will be born in

⁸ Ephesians 4:17-18

Bethlehem.⁹ Here is the most puzzling question concerning the Jewish teachers of the Law. Since they knew about the prophecy, and apparently the prophecy was being fulfilled, why did they not run off to Bethlehem immediately? Why did they not drop what they were doing and race to find the Messiah of the Jewish people? The answer is simple: they lacked wisdom. God is very clear that there are those that believe in Him and those that do not. Within the kingdom, it does not matter whether you are ignorant, like Herod, or you are knowledgeable, like the teachers of the Law, if you do not believe you will be among the goats. The teachers of the Law were knowledgeable about what they read. However, their hearts were hardened and they did not believe. This is cause for great concern, too. Herod was ignorant; however, the teachers were knowledgeable and refused to believe. Please understand that ignorance is no excuse. Within our judicial system today, you are presumed to know the law. If you are pulled over for driving too fast and your only defense is that you did not know you were driving over the speed limit, you will still get a ticket. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. The same holds true for the ignorance of God and His Word. Ignorance of the Epiphany, the manifestation of God, the coming of the Christ child, and the belief in what the Holy Scriptures tell us, is no excuse. In some ways, the teachers of the Law are worse than Herod for they know what the Scriptures foretold and they refuse to believe it. The writer of the book of Proverbs writes: “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline”.¹⁰ If you despise believing in what is clearly the truth, you are considered a fool in the eyes of God. James writes in his epistle, “if anyone lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding

⁹ Micah 5:2

¹⁰ Proverbs 1:7

fault”.¹¹ Wisdom is available to everyone. You simply need to ask God for it. Pray, “Dear Lord, give me your light. Give me an epiphany and let me know your truth and believe it.” and the Holy Spirit will enter your heart. Study the Scriptures so that you are not ignorant of Jesus Christ, but, above all, believe what you read and know that Christ is Lord.

Our third group within the text is the wise men from the east. There are many questions about these visitors, also known as Magi. Where did they come from? How many of them were there? What are their names? We seek to know the answers to these questions, but Holy Scripture is silent. We do not know the answers. The Magi appear out of nowhere, coming from the east. There is very good reason to believe they came from Babylon. If so, they would have been dressed far differently from the Jewish people in the town of Jerusalem. One interesting note that is not obvious in our English translation is what they were doing in Jerusalem. Our English translation states that they came into Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”¹² However, the English reader misses the intensity of their seeking. In the Greek language, the word “asked” has a meaning that indicates a continuous action. The Magi were asking everyone, non-stop, “Where is the King of the Jews?” They were intently “seeking” where is the Christ child? They saw His star and followed it from a far off land. This is what disturbed Herod as well as the people of the town of Jerusalem. The Magi would not accept “no” for an answer. They would not accept ignorance. They sought Him out with their hearts. They had the knowledge that the Jewish teachers of the Law possessed. More than likely these Magi

¹¹ James 1:5

¹² Matthew 2:2

were from Babylon. In the Old Testament we read that the Jews were carried off to Babylon. The Jewish people were defeated by the Babylonians and, following their defeat, the Babylonians carried the people away. During this period of exile in Babylon, the Jewish people were given much freedom to pursue businesses and continue worshipping their God. It is my belief that at this time the Jewish people shared their Scriptures with the Babylonians. The Magi, a sect that studied astronomy, heard about the prophecy of the coming Messiah initiated by the appearance of a certain star.¹³ Although it was the Jewish people and their Holy Scriptures that contained the knowledge of this prophecy, the difference between the people in Jerusalem and the Magi is that the Magi believed what they had been told. The Magi had both knowledge and wisdom. Once they heard from the teachers of the Law where the Messiah was prophesied to be born, they immediately left, continuing on their journey to find the child. So they continued to follow the star in the sky, which led them to the place where the child was, and they worshiped Him. The Magi bowed down and paid homage to the King. In addition, they presented gifts to the King of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. One of the early church fathers explains that the Magi brought gold because gold was a kingly element. The Magi brought myrrh because this was a human fragrance that people used to make themselves smell better. You must remember that two-thousand years ago, people did not bathe as often as we do today. They kept themselves smelling good with the use of fragrances; myrrh being one of them. Myrrh was also used upon a corpse to keep the smell at bay. Finally, the Magi brought frankincense. Throughout the Old Testament, frankincense is identified as incense used in the

¹³ Numbers 24:7

tabernacle and, later, the temple.¹⁴ Frankincense was a symbol of the Divine presence of God. Gold for a King, myrrh for a man, and frankincense for God. These treasures are perfect gifts for Jesus Christ, the king who manifested Himself for His people: both God and man. The Magi obtained the knowledge of Christ and were given the wisdom to believe and trust it.

I am often amazed at how we focus on ourselves and lose track of what the Holy Scriptures tell us. Sometimes we are ignorant and sometimes we know, but refuse to believe. We think, "It is impossible!" and yet the Scriptures tell us "with God all things are possible"¹⁵. We think, "I am too tired" and yet the Scriptures tell us, "come to me... and I will give you rest"¹⁶. We think, "I am so alone" and yet the Scriptures tell us, "I will never forsake you"¹⁷. We think "I am not smart enough" and yet the scriptures tell us, "come to me and I will give you wisdom"¹⁸. I recently saw a sign on my Facebook page¹⁹ that said, "Wise men still seek Him". Is that not the true representation of wisdom? We seek Him. We want the presence of God. We want a manifestation. We want an epiphany. You know what? We get it right here when we celebrate and receive the Lord's Supper. Christ is truly present with us in the bread and the wine. Today, when you receive the body and blood of Christ, remember that you are witnessing an epiphany. Not just an epiphany within your mind, but the real manifestation of Jesus Christ which fills you and becomes a part of your very soul and body as you eat the bread and drink the wine. This is a glorious day. Epiphany is a wonderful day that

¹⁴ Exodus 20:34, Malachi 1:11

¹⁵ Matthew 19:26

¹⁶ Matthew 11:28

¹⁷ Matthew 28:20, Hebrews 13:5

¹⁸ James 1:5

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/#!/LighthouseLutheranChurch>

excites me and I want you to feel that same excitement. This excitement should not stop when you leave the sanctuary either. I want you to take your knowledge and wisdom of Christ out of this place. I want you to be a beacon of light to the rest of the world. The first lesson today talked about the world being in darkness, but it truly is not in darkness any longer. The light shines brightly. So, be a part of that light. Be one of its lumens. Let that beacon of truth shine bright all your life as you share your knowledge and wisdom of Christ.

I will finish with a quote from Brian O'Driscoll²⁰ that I recently read who had something to say about the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Mr. O'Driscoll said, "Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad". Know your scriptures. But even more importantly than knowing what God has to say to His people, believe it. Trust in His Word and, like the wise men, constantly seek His presence in your life. Amen.

²⁰ Brian O'Driscoll is an Irish, professional, rugby player

SERMON OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION:

Epiphany – manifestation (vision of God) – theophany

Manifestation of God to Israel

Manifestation of Christ (birth)

Manifestation of Christ (post resurrection)

Manifestation of Christ (second coming)

- an experience of sudden or striking realization (Eureka) - CHRIST IS GOD!

Homiletical Point: Knowledge is important, but only true wisdom (applied knowledge) is beneficial.

1. King Herod demonstrates that ignorance is masked with anger, tyranny, and poor execution.

Explain: King Herod; Idumaeen – not Jewish; Did not know the Scriptures; Deeply troubled

Illustrate: Ignorance of the Law does not excuse (jurisprudence – presumed knowledge of the law)

Apply: Life without Scripture pulls you away from Christ.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 4:17** So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

2. The Jews and their leaders demonstrate that knowledge alone, when it is not trusted, does a man no good.

Explain: Leaders (and people) knew the Scriptures; Deeply troubled

Illustrate: Putting your hand on a hot stove – you know it is hot, but want to feel for yourself

Apply: Life without the trust of what the Scriptures point to, Christ, is meaningless.

^{NIV} **Proverbs 1:7** The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

^{NIV} **James 1:5** If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

3. The Magi demonstrated that knowledge, which is trusted, liberates a man from all bondage.

Explain: Magi knew the prophecies; Sought continuously;

Illustrate: It is impossible – all things are possible through Christ

I'm too tired – Come to me and I will give you rest

I feel all alone – I will never forsake you

I'm not smart enough – I will give you wisdom

Apply: Wise men still seek Him – The Word of God gives wisdom to all men in their hearts

Or as rugby star Brian O'Driscoll once said, "Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad."

CONCLUSION: Knowledge is important, but only true wisdom (applied knowledge) is beneficial.

Epiphany – Eureka! Have your epiphany moment, open the Scriptures and seek out the incarnate God, Christ.