**Christ Is Still Shepherd of His Church**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

*Epiphany of our Lord*

*01.06.2020*

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

Well, Christmas went a whole lot faster than it came. Christmas programs started airing on TV just after Halloween. And, if you noticed, many of the stores had their decorations up and Christmas candy for sale about the same time. Almost two months before Christmas, people were getting ready for Christmas.

Many Christmas trees were set outside by the Sunday after Christmas, December 27, expended for this year. Perhaps for society Christmas was over, but that just shows what happens when imitators get their hands on something of God’s. Christmas did not originate with society; and it certainly does not belong to it.

Christmas originated in the heart and promise of Almighty God. It still does not belong to society now, it belongs to Christ –AND – to all His saints and to His church. In the church, Christmas continues from Christmas Eve at midnight until the celebration of the Eve of the Epiphany of our Lord. Yesterday was that 12th day of Christmas. January 6, the Epiphany of our Lord means that Christmas is over.

Wonderfully, Epiphany this year falls on a Wednesday. I suppose it would be more greatly attended if it were on a Sunday, but you folks have the joy of one of those special church celebrations which does not often get celebrated because we cannot heat up the church, pay an organist, and have a special service which nobody will attend.

In our Gospel lesson today, Wisemen from the East came to worship Jesus. These wise men, or as they are often called, magi, were not of Jewish descent. They were Gentiles. It is probably that they were familiar with Judaism as Jews had spread all over the world. So, they probably knew of God and His promises, but were not descendants of Abraham.

To them this star appeared as a portent, a sign, pointing to some magnificent event. They understood that sign to mean that God's own Son had been born, one who would be King of the Jews. They came to Jerusalem, for that is where any king of the Jews would have to be living. So, they came to Herod to ask where it had happened. Herod had the chief priests and the scribes attempt to determine who and what this child was.

They turn to the Scriptures. In God’s Word is the prophecy which the chief priests discovered spoke of Bethlehem, and it said, "For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will Shepherd My people Israel." Herod mis-understood, He thought it was speaking of an earthly king and got nervous about his own ruling of Israel, fearing that this Child might usurp his rule. He did not get it! Even as Jesus had to inform Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world!”

Israel is often used by God as a word meaning, ‘the church’ – God’s church. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were God's chosen people. God chose the Israelites to be His people – to be ‘The Church’. God did not do this because they were special or because they were better than others. God chose Abraham and his descendants to show how great God was. It was God who would, and did, make of Abraham and his barren wife a great nation.

It wasn't Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, David, Solomon, or any of the judges or kings that made Israel a great nation. It was their God. In spite of the shortcomings of all these sinful men, God made Israel great. God grew the church of the Old Testament. He made these men to be great men of faith, for it was the Holy Spirit who worked the faith in these men which made them great.

In Jesus’ day as well, it wasn't the church made by men that was powerful. The building in Jerusalem which was called the temple, Jesus called a den of thieves. It was no longer “the church.” Faith in God had left. Herod wanted to destroy the Son of God – he was not a man of faith. He was a man overwhelmed by worldly corruption and the desire of his flesh for power and prestige.

Who then were the men of faith in our text? Herod was not a Jew, although it was said that his father did go to the temple to worship. He was king because he had asked the Roman Emperor to make him king. But, Herod had built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, a glorious edifice in which the Jews could worship.

But all Jerusalem got upset with him because, although they were members of the church, they had no faith, they were citizens of the nation of Israel, but they did not trust in God as had their forefathers.

Neither was Herod looking for God's work to be done. He was looking for his reign to continue. He wanted power over all the region. He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him – they were troubled because they knew Herod’s anger meant people might lose their lives.

Were the wise men, men of faith? God the Holy Spirit had come upon them in their studies of the stars and of history and led them to Bethlehem to see this thing which had come to pass. They were from an area in which the Israelites had been taken captive “back in the day.” Hebrew Scriptures had been left in their area, and these professors were probably exposed to them. They made the claim that they had come to worship Jesus. Were they coming to worship an earthly king? Hardly! They were come to worship the king of the Jews. They had come to worship Him who would shepherd His people Israel.

While these men wanted to ***worship*** the Son of God, Herod wanted to kill him. Herod wanted his reign to continue, and the church to remain the way it was. He was in fear because of his spiritual corruption. Herod was caught up in human thinking and human doing. He was proud of what he had accomplished. Herod was proud of the temple he has built.

Are you like Herod. We are proud of what we have, and of what we have become. You look at your church, at Zion or St. Peter or St. John, and you are proud of how long you have been there. You are proud of how long your family has been members of this church. You are proud of your work in the community. You are proud of your building. You are proud of our human accomplishments. You are proud of what you have made the church – and that church is the building: Zion Lutheran Church, Embarrass; St. Peter Lutheran Church, Pella Opening; St. John Lutheran Church, Belle Plaine.

Church is not about a building. Church is not about a budget. It is not about being here for over 125 years. It is not even about being part of a Synod, a church body, that is over 150 years old.

Herod had all those things. There was the temple, he was responsible for building. In fact, it was more magnificent and elaborate than the one God had designed and which Solomon had built for Him. They had plenty of societies and projects and chances for fellowship.

What was lacking in Herod? Faith! Christmas came to them. God's greatest gift came to them and their faith was replaced with fear of this Child. The true church was not in Jerusalem with all its priests and scribes. The true church was in Bethlehem. The wise men came to find the true King of kings and Lord of lords. They did not find Him in Herod's palace. They did not find Him in the temple in Jerusalem. They found Him in His mother’s arms, an infant like any other baby. But this One is indeed Christ the Lord.

Today, many are the people who think that they do not need this baby in a manger. They are afraid of Him. These people claim to seek the Holy Spirit. They even claim that the Holy Spirit works in them, but they seek the Holy Spirit apart from Christ. They seek the Holy Spirit in their own experiences in their own doing.

They are afraid of this baby in a manger because this baby does not show how helpless He is, but how helpless they are. This baby in a manger is the only way to be saved from the helpless mess of sin in which all people find themselves entangled.

The wisemen from the east came and bowed down and worshiped this Child. They gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Even as they gave to Him their gifts, they received from this infant King, the greatest gift. They came bowed upon repentant knees and received the forgiveness of their sins, life and salvation. They came to worship a king and found their Savior as well.

This infant they bowed down before, and presented their gifts to, was born to take away their sins. In coming to Jesus, they found their Savior. 33 year later, this child’s perfect life would be sacrificed upon the cross of Calvary, and the redemption He purchased there is the gift the Magi received that day by faith. Their faith brought them there to worship their Savior and King.

You and I need a Savior. Christ knows this. Almost 2021 years ago He came to His people. He came to be ruler over Israel. But not as a ruler not over a nation, but ruler over His church. He came to Shepherd His flock to safe pastures. He came to feed them and water them. He came to protect them and keep them. He came to give to them what He would purchase for them with His own lifeblood shed upon the hill called Golgotha. Jesus came to Shepherd His church. And He does so still.

Epiphany is about revealing, it is about the glory of God shining through. Many think of the magi and still think of Christmas. How many crèche scenes have the magi as part of that Christmas display? So, might we say this is day 13 of Christmas? Why not!

So again, the babe of Bethlehem comes to you. Jesus shepherds His church by coming to you in Word and Sacrament, the means by which He gives to you the salvation He purchased. He Shepherds you by giving and sending His Holy Spirit to work and to build faith in you that you might cling to the wonderful gifts of forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation.

As the magi were moved by the Holy Spirit to come to Bethlehem, you are moved to come to see the child of Bethlehem as well. The Holy Spirit calls and gathers you together as the Church where Christ is still Shepherd. The Holy Spirit calls and gathers you to Christ, to receive the gift of Christmas.

Christ is here, coming to you as He was hidden in the infant in Mary’s arms. As He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, here He is as Luther has said we would find Him, “The Word and Sacrament are the manger and the swaddling clothes into which it has pleased Christ to lay Himself.”

Christ is still Shepherd of His church. It is He who keeps you in the faith, through those gifts He continually bestows upon you. And like the wise men, we have come to worship Him – and He comes to bless us with His gifts. Thanks be to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.