

In Nomine Iesu

The Epiphany of our Lord 2024

Don't stumble in the light – Matthew 2:1-11

“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, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the King heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: *‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’*”

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear friends to whom he the grace of God has been revealed:

You stumble onto a wonderful opportunity, the purchase of a house or piece of land or of a stock that later became worth many times more than the price you paid or the perfect job opportunity. You waited too long or decided not to do it. Years later, you see clearly how big a mistake you made. But it's too late. Now you only have regret.

Winston Churchill said, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.” Many people stumble onto the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, but are in such a hurry to get on with their lives that they rush off as if they'd not heard it. The day will come – **it's called judgment day** – when they will recognize what they passed by, and regret it. We see this in Herod's reaction to the news of the Messiah's birth, a truth he stumbled upon, even though he ruled the very people to whom God had given the light of His word. On the other hand sometimes people do hear and believe, do joyfully hold on to the truth that God Himself places in their path. We see this in the reaction of the wise men, who had been led by the light of a star into the far brighter light of God's word.

I

That star led the magi to Jerusalem, Israel's capital. Since they searched for a newly born king, they asked about Him at the mostly likely place, the palace of the reigning king. Matthew tells us, “When Herod the King heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” When Herod sought the counsel of the priests and scribes, what they said did not comfort him at all, even though he had stumbled onto the greatest opportunity ever. Strangers brought him the “when” of the opportunity, and his own

officials now provided him with the “where” needed to find it. But even then he, as Churchill later said, hurried “off as if nothing had happened.” Having stumbled over it in the light, he proceeded to pick himself up and rush off into darkness.

Ironically, Herod secretly called the wise men, and gave them the place of the King’s birth to go with their knowledge of the time. Then he asked them to bring him word of what they found. Their reaction was the opposite of Herod’s: “When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.” (vv. 9-10) In the sincerity of their faith, they might have returned to Herod. For the children of God are often misled by the deviousness of unbelievers and take in good faith what is offered in bad. But they don’t always remain deceived. They are often led out of danger, if need be, by heaven itself. In any event the wise men listened to the prophetic words that Herod related to them: In Bethlehem, the Prophet Micah foretold, they would find the King for whom they searched. They believed that word and set off.

The enemies of Christ sometimes teach rightly. For example, Caiaphas the high priest taught that it was expedient that one man should die for the people. (John 11:50) And the corrupt prophet Balaam uttered the truth about Christ and His salvation centuries earlier as the children of Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 24) In each case these men whose hearts, darkened by sin and corruption, spoke the truth. They didn’t understand what they said, but it was truth. This is why Jesus instructed people to listen to the priests when they sat in Moses’ seat, that is, when they spoke in accord with their God-given office as teachers of the church. (Matthew 23:2-3) The wise men were right to listen to Herod for the sake of the Scriptures he spoke to them, even though he was filled with evil intent. A person, however evil in intention, does not diminish the truth of Scripture. Conversely, we are not to listen to false teaching about God, even if spoken by a heavenly angel! Teaching by the saintliest of pastors and teachers which goes against the objective truth revealed in God’s word, must be rejected. Teaching human reason as if it were divine truth is rebellion against God, and does unspeakable damage to the souls of people.

In telling us what happened after the wisemen had spoken with him, Matthew omits Herod’s name, saying only that the wise men heard the king. In the same way, John says Caiaphas uttered true and reliable prophecies not because he was Caiaphas, but because he was high priest that year. (John 11:51) The offices of king and priest were good. God gave them to His people for their good. A king or, in our day, a president, is called by God to defend their people from earthly enemies. A pastor is called to defend them from spiritual enemies. Wicked people may make evil use of their God-ordained offices, but the offices themselves are not evil. Just as gold and silver are creations of God and surely good, and yet they can be put to evil uses.

II

So, we see that God used Herod as king to channel His blessing to the wise men and to many others. So, you see, they didn’t listen to Herod, but to the king. It did not concern them that he intended evil. They just took hold of the good in his words. They listened as he told them to go to Bethlehem, the city the prophet had foretold as the birthplace of the Savior-King, and there search for the Child. That knowledge didn’t come from Herod’s black heart or the intrigues of corrupt priests, but from the Holy Scriptures, where the priests found it. The wise men didn’t know about Herod’s

evil life or his wicked purposes in telling them to search for the Child. Similarly, we too are to distinguish office from officeholder. We are to hate corruption, sin, and evil, but respect the office people who do such things hold by God's authority, just as we are to hate sin, but to love and pray for the people who sin, that they may do right, and may be saved.

As they departed Jerusalem the star reappeared, even though they did not need it any more. Still it strengthened their trust in God, who was leading them to the Savior in accordance with His word. As Moses says, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." The wise men heard Micah's prophecy as witness of Christ's birth. Now the second witness, the star, which was itself foretold in the same Scriptures by Balaam, agreed, and led them to the place they could be sure was the right one. And so they proceeded toward their goal with exceeding great joy.

"And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. When they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (v. 10) We take careful note that the wise men were kept from finding Christ by their own efforts or by any human wisdom. They found Him solely through the word of the prophet whom God called to utter His prophetic word, and with the aid of the miraculous star, itself also predicted in the Scriptures. This is the way God's salvation always comes to people: by grace, by the will and action of God, through someone whom God appointed to bring salvation to them. From this we see that all natural ability, all human reasoning that claims to teach truth, all light outside of that given by the Word of God leads not to salvation and life, but to error and death. Christ and the knowledge of salvation are not taught or acquired by any human reason or wisdom. The light of Holy Scripture must reveal Him, for that is how the Holy Spirit works. As Jesus later said to Peter when he confessed Christ, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 16:17)

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Jesus later said to His disciples, "No one can come to Me, except the Father who sent Me draws him." (John 6:44) By this He condemned human reason in spiritual things. It only leads astray. The Epiphany Gospel shows us that God resists our proud, sin-darkened understanding in order that we may learn we are blind in spiritual matters, and despair of the light of our own reason, that we put ourselves into His hands and be led into ways which reason cannot follow, but faith can. Jesus once said, "You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life. And they are they which testify of Me." The message of Epiphany is not only that the Scriptures both testify of and lead us to Christ and His salvation, but that they **alone** do this. The Apostle Peter said, "We have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place." (2 Peter 1:19) This is the light that God has given to shine in our sin-darkened world. To believe the word in its simple truth is to find Christ and His salvation. Dear friends, do not stumble in the light over the truth God sets before us, and hurry on past. No, hear it; and believe it. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria