

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

Today is the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ. In our worship today, we celebrate the revelation of Jesus or the manifestation of Jesus Christ who is born in Bethlehem of Judea. This Feast of the Epiphany also commemorates the visit of the royal Magi or the Wise Men to the Christ Child. And before we give it another thought, we instantly conjure up the very peaceful and serene image of these Wise Men presenting gifts at the Crèche.

In a moment just after this sermon we will reinforce that peaceful image with the hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” We probably all remember this Epiphany scene NOT through the Gospel lesson before us today but through song:

<sup>1</sup> We three kings of Orient are;  
bearing gifts we traverse afar,  
field and fountain,  
moor and mountain,  
following yonder star.

Refrain

Oh, star of wonder, star of night,  
star with royal beauty bright;  
westward leading, still proceeding,  
guide us to thy perfect light!

Star of wonder, star of night, we sing of this regal, this beautiful bright star, as a leading gleam of light during the darkest days of the year. And as we look upon this entire Nativity scene there is a sentimentality that goes along with the comfortable and cozy image we have of this birth and this visit of the Wise Men. I guess with all the artistic renditions of this scene along with the songs and hymns that tuck our images away in this manger, one can only look upon this scene and romanticize and sentimentalize. We get caught up in our cherished image and the reality of the scene is not thought of because we suspend our disbelief. In our suspension of disbelief, we end up projecting our peacefully romantic and sentimental feelings onto this scene along with those who come bearing gifts and we tend to miss the fuller intent behind the scene.

Case in point, if I asked you all to sing the first verse of *We Three Kings* without looking at the words and leaving out the rubber cigars, you could very easily do it. But FOR the reality of the scene, sing the verse about the Myrrh that is brought to the baby Jesus...which is the fourth verse. I couldn't do it either but my point is not to see if we memorized the song my point is to draw our attention to the reality of the scene that can be found in verse four of this hymn.

<sup>4</sup> Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume  
breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Imagine for a moment someone showing up with the gift of Myrrh after you give birth to your first-born child. This is not really a gift that is going to show up on many baby registries. But this gift is not presented as the formal and proper thing to do...this gift reveals something

more...it brings something more into this scene...it brings death into the scene. Myrrh was present at Jesus' death and burial. Jesus was offered wine and myrrh at his crucifixion but refused it. In the Gospel of Mark we hear this:

<sup>23</sup> And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. (Mark 15:23)

According to John's Gospel, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea brought a 100-pound mixture of myrrh and aloes to wrap Jesus' body for burial. I'm going to make an assumption, which is dangerous I know, but, if I asked for you to describe this Nativity scene, I don't think any words like "death," "gloom," "danger," or "fear" would come up in any of the descriptions. Nonetheless, these things undergird the stillness and the serenity of this baby's birth.

There is more here...in this scene than meets the eye and the heart as we gaze upon this Nativity. Besides the Christological meaning, rather the spiritual meaning of this event, there is also a historical reality in the birth of Jesus Christ. However, we seem to think that because of the violent condition of the world, more specifically, our immoral nature of our culture, we tend to think that we can scare God off or chase God out of our lives. We think by taking prayer out of schools and the Ten Commandments out of our public buildings we are destroying faith and even God Himself. We then patronize God in our cheap clichés like...keep Christ in Christmas...or that we destroy the remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ himself by saying happy holidays instead of merry Christmas.

We may think that because of the war and violence that occurs in our world today we are discouraging God or even destroying God and some have even claimed that God is dead. But the fact is and remains, God has acted and has come among us in the birth that is represented in this Nativity...and we can't change that nor deny that...no matter what. Nothing in this world can separate any of us from the love that God makes known to us in the birth of Jesus Christ that is set before us in this simple manger scene that is set in and among our fear, our gloom, our danger, and among death itself. This is the point about the Nativity that is very subtle but very much present in the fullness of the Nativity of our Lord set against the fullness of our world.

For those who attend our Christmas Eve service here at St. Paul, I have, since I have been ordained, began each Christmas Eve service with a certain Christmas proclamation that a very dear mentor of mine shared with me. This particular proclamation was written for use on the Vigil of Christmas to be read in monasteries and more recently read and sung in parish churches. The introduction to the Christmas Eve service follows the chronology accepted at the time it was composed and treats the Nativity of Jesus Christ as the greatest event in the history of the world since creation. This proclamation eloquently places the birth of Christ in relation to a variety of significant historical events, from the creation to the exodus to the founding of Rome, in order to declare that this event took place in history and that it truly happened.<sup>1</sup> The proclamation concludes with this declaration:

In the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad the seven hundred and fifty-second year of the reign of Octavian Augustus; the whole world being at peace, Jesus Christ, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to sanctify the world by his most merciful coming, being conceived by the Holy Spirit, and nine months having passed since his

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<sup>1</sup> The explanation of the Christmas Proclamation comes from the inside page of our worship folder published each year for our Christmas Eve Candlelight Mass.

conception, was born in Bethlehem of Judea of the Virgin Mary. Today is the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh.

And like the Nativity scene itself, these words are undergirded by a very contrasting thought or image that the words and the Nativity scene itself outwardly evokes. We hear in this proclamation that, “the whole world being at peace,” and this only feeds into our serene image. But the reality is that Jesus was born into essentially a third-world context under a military dictatorship. It was a society where the about 10% of the population was born into nobility and lived lavishly and coerced the 90% living in that agrarian society. In other words, the whole world was at peace because it dare not do anything that would go against nobility’s power and force of its dictatorship that would simply destroy you. And let’s face it, if the whole world was truly at peace, why would God need to come to us in the first place?

So, against the backdrop of power, intimidation, and fear, God does not appear with more power and force...there is literally an Epiphany, God appears in a very calm, un-intrusive setting in the form of a vulnerable baby that draws the audience of the Magi or what we know as the Three Kings of the Orient or the Three “Wise men.” And because of their appearance, we add not just a layer of colorful, aromatic, and exotic Persian royalty; we also add another layer of scandal and misunderstanding to our scene.

Sadly, but very interestingly, one commentary says this about the Magi:

The Magi were what many today would call quacks and maybe even charlatans. The Old Testament actually provides even choicer language for such persons: the Bible condemns Magi types as idolatrous deceivers to be avoided by godly folk. Indeed, a Jewish rabbi wrote not long before the birth of Jesus: “He who learns from a magi is worthy of death.”<sup>2</sup>

So, what is my point today...my point is NOT to destroy our images and our wonderfully comforting sense of the crèche, my point is NOT to destroy the imagery of this beautifully simple birth of Jesus Christ, it is for us to see that God is present in the mess of our world. And in the wake of God’s most humble and very vulnerable Epiphany, the most unlikely guest have arrived at the foot of this dear baby who is born for all. In this barn surrounded by animals, shepherds, magi, and two very confused but very devout parents is born for us the pure and far reaching power of God’s gift of grace.

This baby has drawn into his presence the most unlikely of guests, and this child will grow and continue to attract the unlikely such as, Samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors, despised Roman soldiers, ostracized lepers,<sup>3</sup> and just the general sludge of society...and yes, even you and I...all to say, this is who this child is born unto.

Today, in this simple little barn, we have an image in this simple manger of justice, mercy, and faith...we have in this scene a church. In this church is the body of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is at the center of this scene and those who have gathered are every form of human brokenness that

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<sup>2</sup> Van Harn, Roger E. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Epiphany of the Lord, Years A, B, C Gospel lesson Matthew 2:1-12, page 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. page 7.

one can imagine, but the door of this scene is NON-existent, in other words all are invited in and all come before the baby Jesus bringing our gifts to present to our new-born king. And so, we present to the baby our brokenness, our sin, and our shame.

In this manger scene that is before us today, this baby who is Jesus Christ lies helplessly in a feeding trough feeding grace and mercy to all who have gathered. Today before us lies that same baby, that same shining light in the darkness of the world today, the same promise of forgiveness and life. Today before us in bread and wine God is feeding us the grace of Jesus Christ placed into our hands. Come now taste and see the forgiveness and life given to us all in the body and blood of this dear baby, Jesus Christ who is the Epiphany of God before us.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*