

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

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord and give thanks to Almighty God for "shinning forth" to us in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ. Today, we also celebrate and give thanks that God also shines forth within each of us through the very faith that is awakened in us through the Holy Spirit and enables us to worship and to see God in this very common and ordinary manger setting before us and in very common elements such as the words of this proclamation and in the elements of bread and wine. We also recognize the visitation of the Magi to the child Jesus on this day, and we do so according to our Gospel lesson from Matthew.

From this Gospel lesson we experience the Epiphany of God's light appearing and the revelation by which lives and views are greatly changed and inspired to take another road in our lives, all while we gather around and gaze upon this humble scene before us and consider the full impact of this *epiphaneia*...the Epiphany, the appearance, or the manifestation of God in this baby...who is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

So here we are once again, at this manger scene just as we were the other night on Christmas Eve. However, we change Gospels from Luke to Matthew. Now we have the visitors from the east we know as the "Wise Men" joining this manger scene. And once again I ask, what emotion, or what mood is evoked in you when you look upon this scene?

On Christmas Eve I suggested in the sermon that I believe our empathetic sentimentality blinds us to what is truly before us and overshadows the quintessence of God's revelation in mercy and grace being revealed for us in this simple scene. Likewise, our sentimentality blinds us to the details of this Nativity and these "Wise Men" that together with all the details, rather than our sentimentality, the essence of this scene may just open our hearts and our minds to the vast depth of mercy that is being revealed, not just to us, but to all people who look upon this birth.

From the start of St. Matthew's Gospel along with the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel, we hear that the holy Child is surrounded by and associated with rather seedy and dishonorable sort of folks. Instead of Jesus being born in a royal castle in a royal city, surrounded by nobility and aristocrats, or being attended to by the finest servants and placed into a safe nursery away from the elements, protected by a king's military, and laid in the finest crib...instead, Jesus is born in a stable and placed in a grungy-dirty feeding trough. The witnesses of his birth are animals: cows and sheep and so on. His first visitors are not dignitaries of state or kings and queens, but shepherds – humble, working people, sometimes looked down upon suspiciously because they were called trash and considered low-life trespassers who led their flocks without much regard for property lines. And today, Matthew adds more suspicion with a visit from the "Wise Men."

Furthermore today, St. Matthew seems to breakdown our sentimentality by beginning the Christmas story by recounting the genealogy on Jesus with some strange entries. Most Biblical genealogies trace the line of descent through men: Joseph, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. But Matthew includes four women in his genealogy of Jesus – and each of them is either foreign or somehow connected with scandal. One of them, Tamar, played the role of a prostitute in order to get impregnated by her father-in-law, Judah and secure her place in the family by doing so. Rahab makes the genealogy and *was* a prostitute. Ruth is a Moabite woman who

marries a Judean immigrant named Mahlon who dies. She then finagles a marriage with Boaz and has a son named Obed, who became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David. And I cannot think about King David without thinking about poor Bathsheba who was the victim of King David's adultery and murder. The preacher was right back then and remains true in his words to us, there is nothing new under the sun...politics and scandal never really change. All of this is connected with and leads up to our appointed Gospel lesson today, making this a very strange beginning to the story of the manifestation of God before us in this Nativity.¹

And today, the Nativity is visited by foreigners that we have come to know as the "Wise Men" or the magi. For the most part, the Bible does not like this class of people either. The Greek word for magi refers to them as magicians or sorcerers, a shifting profession over the centuries, but none of it very good and all of it strange. The magi were priests in the Persian court, or they were astrologers, studying the stars and trying to define human destiny from them. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the magi are dismissed, they are mocked, and called quacks and charlatans. While there is no physical description of the magi in the Bible, we have from the many artistic interpretations of them a fairly dignified concept of them because of the artistic interpretations.

But I picture the magi as the flamboyant rock and roll stars over the years whose appearances in the beginning years of rock and roll were questioned and found to be threatening to the values of our culture...adding to the mysterious attraction to them. And yes, most of the early rock and roll stars were considered quacks, charlatans, and just plain down evil. I guess the only thing that didn't resemble the magi is that they didn't ride camels...but they did influence the culture and the youth of that time...much like the magi influence our sentimentality when we consider them in this scene.

Isaiah even mocks the Babylonian magi, all those star-gazers and wizards – he says they are like wisps of straw when he proclaims:

¹²Keep to your spells then, and all your sorceries, at which you have worked so hard since you were young. Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will strike terror! ¹³You have had many tiring consultations: let the astrologers come forward now and save you, the star-gazers who announce month by month what will happen to you next. ¹⁴Look, they are like wisps of straw, the fire will burn them up. They will not save their lives from the power of the flame. No embers these, for keeping warm, no fire to sit beside! ¹⁵Such will your wizards prove to be for you, for whom you have worked so hard since you were young; each wandering his own way, none of them can save you.

(NJB Isaiah 47:12-15)

Yes, I think we can safely say that the holy Child is visited and surrounded by and associated with a rather seedy and dishonorable sorts of folks, but let's not forget we surround the child as well...adding ourselves to the suspicious sort of folks who are led to this scene. I am not encouraging us to look past our empathetic-sentimentality in order to see the reality of this scene so, we can redirect our false sense of Christian bravado toward other people like it's a weapon of

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self-righteous legalism to step on others to make ourselves feel better. As I said, when we gaze upon the Epiphany, the appearance, or the manifestation of God in this child Jesus may we see that we are NOT the righteous visitors who are gazing upon this Nativity, we are just like those associated with the history of this scene and those who are visiting this scene. We, like all those who gather into this scene are led to the Christ Child by God.

This is not some chance encounter. It is the will of our Maker that the Gentiles should seek and find Jesus, that these shepherds and the Magi should seek and follow God's call to this Nativity, and it is God's will that calls, leads, and guides us into this gathering today around this Nativity. We are part of the broken, strange, and blessed audience that gazes upon the Epiphany of grace given to us in this dear baby.

As our Christmastide comes to an end and the quiet serene peaceful Nativity scene comes to its conclusion...it comes with this wonderful line in our Gospel today:

...they (the magi) left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:12b)

May we too, after our visit to this Nativity, this throne of God, with all the brutal honesty of humanity surrounding it and all the merciful and gracious majesty within it, may we all depart from it by another road. In other words, as bring our gifts of time, talent, and treasure, and present our Christian bravado to our Lord, as we visit and gaze upon this scene, may we turn from that road of self-righteousness that brought us here and travel out by a different road that recognizes our brokenness...may we see in this peaceful setting before us our own vulnerability, our own humanity, and our own need for the grace and salvation that is given us. May we look upon this child in this setting and see that it is our road of sin and death that has brought us to this Nativity. But the road we depart on is another road of grace and life because of the child that is given to us in this rude and vulnerable setting that is surrounded by a strange and seedy bunch of sinners.

As the Magi return to their country by another road, we too depart by another road called grace and forgiveness. We depart in God's peace and care when we recognize that this child...this Son of God has come down to earth, not to some lofty palace, temple, or cathedral, but in a lowly manger so that all may recognize God with us and among us in our own rude and vulnerable setting and then...recognize our eternity in *God's* glorious kingdom...and NOT the roads we travel that lead us to our kingdoms along with our roads of assumptions and opinions about ourselves and others. May this be our moment of insight, discovery, or revelation by which our life's roads are changed, our direction is altered in our view of ourselves and our view and understanding of the others around us. And may our view and understanding of the manifestation of God challenge us to look past the quaint comfort of the Nativity scene, look past the false regal scene of the magi, look past our sense of judgmental Christian bravado, and see the grace given NOT just to me or you, but to all who see this scene.

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freely given to all in this child who is light and life and may this be the road we travel so that others may see.

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As our Christmastide comes to an end and the quiet serene peaceful Nativity scene comes to its conclusion...it comes with this wonderful line in our Gospel today:

...they (the magi) left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:12b)

May we too, after our visit to this Nativity, this throne of God, with all the brutal honesty of humanity surrounding it and all the merciful and gracious majesty within it, may we all depart from it by another road. In other words, as bring our gifts of time, talent, and treasure, and present our Christian bravado to our Lord, as we visit and gaze upon this scene, may we turn from that road of self-righteousness that brought us here and travel out by a different road that recognizes our brokenness...may we see in this peaceful setting before us our own vulnerability, our own humanity, and our own need for the grace and salvation that is given us. May we look upon this child in this setting and see that it is our road of sin and death that has brought us to this Nativity. But the road we depart on is another road of grace and life because of the child that is given to us in this rude and vulnerable setting that is surrounded by a strange and seedy bunch of sinners.

As the Magi return to their country by another road, we too depart by another road called grace and forgiveness. We depart in God's peace and care when we recognize that this child...this Son of God has come down to earth, not to some lofty palace, temple, or cathedral, but in a lowly manger so that all may recognize God with us and among us in our own rude and vulnerable setting and then...recognize our eternity in *God's* glorious kingdom...and NOT the roads we travel that lead us to our kingdoms along with our roads of assumptions and opinions about ourselves and others. May this be our moment of insight, discovery, or revelation by which our life's roads are changed, our direction is altered in our view of ourselves and our view and understanding of the others around us. And may our view and understanding of the manifestation of God challenge us to look past the quaint comfort of the Nativity scene, look past the false regal scene of the magi, look past our sense of judgmental Christian bravado, and see the grace given NOT just to me or you, but to all who see this scene.

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freely given to all in this child who is light and life and may this be the road we travel so that others may see.

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

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From the start of St. Matthew's Gospel along with the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel, we hear that the holy Child is surrounded by and associated with rather seedy and dishonorable sort of folks. Instead of Jesus being born in a royal castle in a royal city, surrounded by nobility and aristocrats, or being attended to by the finest servants and placed into a safe nursery away from the elements, protected by a king's military, and laid in the finest crib...instead, Jesus is born in a stable and placed in a grungy-dirty feeding trough. The witnesses of his birth are animals: cows and sheep and so on. His first visitors are not dignitaries of state or kings and queens, but shepherds – humble, working people, sometimes looked down upon suspiciously because they were called trash and considered low-life trespassers who led their flocks without much regard for property lines. And today, Matthew adds more suspicion with a visit from the "Wise Men."

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But I picture the magi as the flamboyant rock and roll stars over the years whose appearances in the beginning years of rock and roll were questioned and found to be threatening to the values of our culture...adding to the mysterious attraction to them. And yes, most of the early rock and roll stars were considered quacks, charlatans, and just plain down evil. I guess the only thing that didn't resemble the magi is that they didn't ride camels...but they did influence the culture and the youth of that time...much like the magi influence our sentimentality when we consider them in this scene.

Isaiah even mocks the Babylonian magi, all those star-gazers and wizards – he says they are like wisps of straw when he proclaims:

¹²Keep to your spells then, and all your sorceries, at which you have worked so hard since you were young. Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will strike terror! ¹³You have had many tiring consultations: let the astrologers come forward now and save you, the star-gazers who announce month by month what will happen to you next. ¹⁴Look, they are like wisps of straw, the fire will burn them up. They will not save their lives from the power of the flame. No embers these, for keeping warm, no fire to sit beside! ¹⁵Such will your wizards prove to be for you, for whom you have worked so hard since you were young; each wandering his own way, none of them can save you.

(NJB Isaiah 47:12-15)

Yes, I think we can safely say that the holy Child is visited and surrounded by and associated with a rather seedy and dishonorable sorts of folks, but let's not forget we surround the child as well...adding ourselves to the suspicious sort of folks who are led to this scene. I am not encouraging us to look past our empathetic-sentimentality in order to see the reality of this scene so, we can redirect our false sense of Christian bravado toward other people like it's a weapon of

¹ The genealogy was adapted from a sermon from Rev. Gregory Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church New York, New York preached February 2, 2005 Epiphany Sunday.

self-righteous legalism to step on others to make ourselves feel better. As I said, when we gaze upon the Epiphany, the appearance, or the manifestation of God in this child Jesus may we see that we are NOT the righteous visitors who are gazing upon this Nativity, we are just like those associated with the history of this scene and those who are visiting this scene. We, like all those who gather into this scene are led to the Christ Child by God.

This is not some chance encounter. It is the will of our Maker that the Gentiles should seek and find Jesus, that these shepherds and the Magi should seek and follow God's call to this Nativity, and it is God's will that calls, leads, and guides us into this gathering today around this Nativity. We are part of the broken, strange, and blessed audience that gazes upon the Epiphany of grace given to us in this dear baby.

As our Christmastide comes to an end and the quiet serene peaceful Nativity scene comes to its conclusion...it comes with this wonderful line in our Gospel today:

...they (the magi) left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:12b)

May we too, after our visit to this Nativity, this throne of God, with all the brutal honesty of humanity surrounding it and all the merciful and gracious majesty within it, may we all depart from it by another road. In other words, as bring our gifts of time, talent, and treasure, and present our Christian bravado to our Lord, as we visit and gaze upon this scene, may we turn from that road of self-righteousness that brought us here and travel out by a different road that recognizes our brokenness...may we see in this peaceful setting before us our own vulnerability, our own humanity, and our own need for the grace and salvation that is given us. May we look upon this child in this setting and see that it is our road of sin and death that has brought us to this Nativity. But the road we depart on is another road of grace and life because of the child that is given to us in this rude and vulnerable setting that is surrounded by a strange and seedy bunch of sinners.

As the Magi return to their country by another road, we too depart by another road called grace and forgiveness. We depart in God's peace and care when we recognize that this child...this Son of God has come down to earth, not to some lofty palace, temple, or cathedral, but in a lowly manger so that all may recognize God with us and among us in our own rude and vulnerable setting and then...recognize our eternity in *God's* glorious kingdom...and NOT the roads we travel that lead us to our kingdoms along with our roads of assumptions and opinions about ourselves and others. May this be our moment of insight, discovery, or revelation by which our life's roads are changed, our direction is altered in our view of ourselves and our view and understanding of the others around us. And may our view and understanding of the manifestation of God challenge us to look past the quaint comfort of the Nativity scene, look past the false regal scene of the magi, look past our sense of judgmental Christian bravado, and see the grace given NOT just to me or you, but to all who see this scene.

This is the day we celebrate and give thanks to God for the Epiphany of our Lord and we remember and celebrate God coming to us and altering the direction of human history by making us all fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise that is Christ Jesus...the vulnerable baby at the center of all humanity. May we lift up our eyes and see...may we discover the manifestation of an unfathomable gift of faith to believe in pure love, grace, and salvation that is

freely given to all in this child who is light and life and may this be the road we travel so that others may see.

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