

"The Star That Brings Joy Has Appeared!"

In the newspaper there was a story about a man, Ervin Wagner, of St. Joseph, who wants to build a 30 foot, illuminated cross on a bluff facing Lake Michigan across the street from his home. Wagner's cross would be visible from the water and would stand atop a stone foundation he owns. Wagner says: "The Lord has been after me to do this for many years." Wagner's dream, however, is being blocked by the city's zoning regulations. The city has a 14 foot limit on accessory structures in residential front yards.

Ervin Wagner's attempt to have a 30 foot cross shine from his yard is being blocked but there's no blocking the light God has revealed to this world in Jesus Christ. The light of salvation shines – we do well to imitate the Magi of old and follow this saving light. "The Star That Brings Joy Has Appeared!" God has revealed Him! He is your Joy!

Today – January 6 – is the Festival of the Epiphany. Epiphany is sometimes called "The Gentile's Christmas." Epiphany reminds us that all people once sat in spiritual darkness. From Adam on, all people have entered this world in a condition of utter blindness toward God. In fact, we not only enter into this world blind to God, we enter life opposed to him. The Lord looks at man in his darkened state and sees, in the words of Moses as he writes in Genesis, "that every inclination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil all the time." Each of us is deserving of God's eternal condemnation.

But there is very good news to Epiphany – God has beamed the light of salvation upon people who once sat in darkness. This light is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world who declared himself to be "the light of the world." The star led the wise men to the Light. In our epistle for the day, Paul wrote of the revealed message of Epiphany: "Through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ."

So, through the message of the Gospel, people – both Jews and Gentiles – come to know the Epiphany light of Jesus Christ. Through the message of the Gospel – Jews and Gentiles see a Savior who died for sin, sin which landed all people in spiritual darkness. Through the message of the Gospel, God would bring all people to Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Paul tells us that "in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

God's Epiphany light is a light to be followed. But in our text we see two very different responses to this Epiphany light. It is as welcome to one group of people as a beam of sunlight during these dark and cloudy days of winter. It is as unwelcome to others as a bright police light which reveals a criminal activity in the middle of the night.

Follow God's Epiphany Light! The Magi did. Mystery has surrounded these gentlemen for thousands of years. Some speculation about them has been just that – speculation. For instance, the commonly held belief that there were 3 Magi simply because 3 gifts were presented to the baby Jesus. Or the names given to them by others: Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar.

Some things are generally assumed to be true of these Magi. They most likely came from Persia and seemed to be religious scholars who, as part of their religious study, studied the heavens. Astrology was originally connected with man's attempt to understand god – it was not what it is today. The Magi also seem to be individuals who knew about the coming Messiah. Remember, they could have found out about the coming Savior from Jews who had been

scattered around the world after the captivity of the Jewish people. As we see, however, their knowledge of the Savior to come was very limited.

Through the light of a star provided by God, the Magi came to the Epiphany light of the world, Jesus Christ. But before they reached this Epiphany light, these Magi needed more information: "In the days of Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

What an impressive sight these men must have been – wealthy people, bearing great gifts. But there was also something else about them – they were Gentiles who had traveled a long way to worship one who was called "The King of the Jews."

These men remind all of us of the beauty and the mercy and grace of Epiphany. In Jesus Christ, God has brought himself to us. But we did not deserve to have him. These Magi bring out the meaning of Epiphany since they were Gentiles who recognized the promised Savior, the King of the Jews. But they also recognized that this promised Savior was for them as well. They eagerly came to follow his light.

Would we feel the same way? Traveling thousands of dust-filled miles to worship a Person who was first given to a people of a different race and background? Let's say that you were invited to a celebration in Germany, hosted by German people and attended mostly by German people. But your invitation tells you that you are welcome to attend. There's a promise of great benefit if you attended. Would you go? We'd hesitate, wouldn't we, because that probably wouldn't be enough to lead us to go.

This Christ is a light to be followed no matter what the cost. If a doctor told you that you oOnly had a few months to live unless you went to a treatment center thousands of miles away, you would probably go. You would probably scrape and save money to make the trip. You would go because you want to live. Their life had been revealed, had been given to them – God had given them eternal joy and they had to see it in person. In the same way, God reveals to you your need and has revealed to you your salvation as the Light of Christ!

Isn't the same true and even more so, of the Savior? The Bible tells us that "He who has the Son has life." Isn't that a light worth following no matter the cost? After all, here we see a Person who has to do with eternal life. He has died for your sin. He has given you eternal life. Follow the Epiphany light.

There will always be those who fail to see the value of God's Epiphany light. Herod appeared to be interested: "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me that I, too, may go and worship him." But Herod wasn't really interested in following the light. Later in this same chapter of Matthew, we see Herod's attempt to kill the Christ-child. Matthew tells us that Herod "was greatly disturbed" when he heard the news of the Magi. He saw in this child a threat to his own rule. All Jerusalem "was disturbed" probably because of Herod's psychological imbalance which, by this time, had led him to murder his own 2 sons and wife.

Herod didn't follow the light. But then, neither did the Jewish people, for the most part. Did you catch the irony that Matthew would have us see in this Epiphany setting? Herod asked the chief priests and teachers of the Law where the Christ was to be born. They replied, "In Bethlehem in Judea for this is what the prophets have written..." These leaders knew exactly where the Christ was to be born; yet, they never followed his light. This Epiphany irony was also recited by John in his Gospel: "He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him." And yet, about these foreigners we're told: "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." Has

God given you this kind of joy? Do you have the joy of knowing the gift of eternal life? What journey would you be willing to make because of the Light of the World?

There's an Epiphany warning here for all of us. The religious leaders of Herod's day illustrate an amazing apathy to which people who have heard it all and recited it all can fall into. About people who had been richly blessed with Scripture, Jesus once said: "You diligently study the Scriptures.... Yet you refuse to come to me and have life." These people had the light and life in their midst and they refused to follow. But the Magi came from far away to follow.

How about you – people upon whom God's light of salvation has richly fallen? If someone were to observe our response or lack of response to the Good News we have received, there's a good chance that an impartial observer might say that we're more like the self-satisfied religious leaders in Jerusalem rather than the Magi who were willing to sacrifice and give their best for this treasure. Heard it all and memorized it all but still don't make the following of Jesus Christ a lifetime and life-long pursuit? It has been suggested that there's a real danger to celebrating Christmas once a year because that's just what it might become to some people – a once-a-year observance which can be forgotten for the rest of the year. People celebrate but they do not follow. Or perhaps they become too familiar with the message of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ and they take it for granted.

What are we to do? The saving light has been revealed, has appeared for you – rejoice! "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They then opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh." Let us resolve to follow God's Epiphany light, Jesus Christ, for all of our life. Let us make this a pursuit which we follow wholeheartedly, no matter what the cost. Let us make it a pursuit which involves our hearts in worship and not simply in casual observance. Rejoice as they rejoiced – put your heart into it! Notice that the Magi "bowed down" when they saw the child. This probably means they knelt, perhaps even went face to the ground, in humbleness before the Savior. They also "worshiped" which has the meaning of intense adoration.

Let us present our treasures as the Magi did theirs. The gifts they presented were expensive, fit for a king. They gave their best. Will we? Follow the Epiphany light. While you may not have a measure of myrrh or expensive incense around the house, let us resolve to give the best of our possessions and even more importantly, the best of ourselves. Remember the length of their journey and their commitment. Do you really want to walk closer with God this new year? The first thing to look at is your level of commitment. God's light is still shining through His Word. God wants ~~y~~Our daily rather than dramatic devotion to Him. Be honest with yourself – "Am I consistent or erratic in my faith life? Am I always here, to give Him my best?" "Am I really dependable or unreliable?" Follow the Epiphany light. To you who sat in darkness, a glorious light has appeared. He is your Joy! Follow him!