

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
January 7, 2024
The Epiphany of Our Lord

Matthew 2:1-12

EVEN ME. EVEN YOU.

You are the mother of the bride. A family shows up at the reception. No one knows who they are. There is no placement for them, no table number, no name card. But they sit down expecting a dinner. Would that not be awkward? What right do they have to be there?

It is awards night at the high school. A thousand family members pack the auditorium. Sports awards, music awards - your child is one of several to be awarded an academic scholarship to a college of her choice. But before she can get to the stage in the noise of applause, someone else beats her there to accept the award. Would that not be galling? Who does this person think he is?

Keep in mind these scenarios as we ponder the account of the wise men from Matthew chapter 2.

But first, we need to set a couple things straight.

The wise men were not part of the manger scene. In fact, the Bible states Jesus might have been as old as two when they arrived. That would also mean –you might have guessed it already – that they didn't arrive to a stable. The Bible says they found Jesus at a house. Perhaps you already guessed another thing... that therefore there was no star above the manger scene. That would have come later too. Now, don't go and burn your manger scene sets at home. It's still a beautiful thing to include the wise men – in their own words they did come to honor the King newly born. And Epiphany is a major part of the overall Christmas observance.

Here's another clarification: there may or may not have been three wise men. We don't know how many there were. The only reason tradition assumes there were three is because of the three kinds of gifts that were given – gold, frankincense and myrrh. But there could have been four wise men, or twelve or twenty-two. The Bible doesn't say. They also would likely have traveled with a team of hired hands.

They must have been men of some importance. It's doubtful King Herod would have taken notice of mere peasants. And unlike peasants, the wise men clearly could afford the leisure to study the stars – something no peasant would have been in a position to do. Scripture calls them “magi” from which we get the word “magician.” Not as in tricksters, but academics. Wise men.

But here's the issue – the real crux of this whole account: what right did these men have to think that the birth of the Savior was a prize for them? Who invited them? Why should they be excited about it?

You see, it is clear these men were not Jews. They were Gentiles, like you and me, from far away. Some surmise that they may have come from the land of Babylon where centuries earlier the Jewish people had lived in exile after the destruction of Jerusalem. It would have been through Jewish influencers like Daniel that the Babylonians would have been exposed to the Old Testament Scriptures.

Gentiles they were. But Jesus was a Jewish Messiah - from the Jews, of the Jews, to the Jews, for the Jews. Out of all the nations on earth Israel was God's chosen nation. To them most prominently, most directly, most repeatedly He promised the Messiah.

Even Jesus, the first time He sent out His disciples to preach, instructed them, "Don't go to the towns of the Gentiles. Go, rather, to the lost sheep of Israel." In his Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote that the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes – first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

You see, the Gentiles, these wise men, were like no-name wedding crashers or presumptuous stage stormers on awards night. Isn't that what you and I are? Who are we? We who live in faraway Sun Prairie, far, far from Bethlehem. We are wedding crashers. We are stage stormers and award thieves. What right do we have to the hope of Israel, this pride of Judah? We have no Jewish ancestry. For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given... but does that mean also *to us*?

The wisemen certainly had done their homework and they certainly knew the Scriptures. For if a person pays attention when they read the Old Testament Scriptures, they will find that yes, indeed, God intended the Messiah not for the Jews only but for the whole world. In fact, this truth subtly permeates through all the Old Testament Scriptures. The New Testament Scriptures on the other hand announce it loudly and clearly. The wisemen understood and believed that the Jewish Savior Jesus was also their Savior and said themselves they had come not merely to see Him or even to honor Him but to worship Him.

Yes, the Baby born in Bethlehem brings us salvation too – even you, even me - but now let's not take this for granted. In the second Scripture lesson today from Romans ____ the Apostle Paul strongly cautions us not to be presumptuous. We were invited to this party by default as it were, not because we were first on the invitation list.

But that's what happens, isn't it? We take it for granted. I mean, do we really repent of our sins, or do we just sort of gloss over that and assume Jesus will save us anyway? Do we really make home devotions or Sunday worship a priority? Do we really try to live according to His commandments or grasp His promises? Or do we glide by on auto-pilot with the presumption that Jesus' salvation will always be there for us – even if we don't pay Him much attention?

In the Epistle to the Romans Paul points out that you, you Gentile, you are like a branch that has been unnaturally grafted into the tree of salvation, but therefore you can just as easily be plucked back out.

So, let's not take this most beautiful truth for granted. You are in fact included on the invitation list - even you – invited to receive forgiveness from a Savior who was crucified to give it to you. You have been invited to be resurrected from the grave by a Savior who rose from death to make it happen for you. You have been invited to your Father's house where there are many rooms by the Savior who ascended there to prepare a place for you. You have been invited to a new life of obedience by the Christ who sends you His Spirit to give birth to a new life in you.

He invites you to come and see Him here – just as the wisemen saw Him – come and behold Him in your Baptism, every time the pastor announces that your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Come and behold His open heart as He speaks to you in His Word. Come and behold Him in the Lord's Supper as He crosses over into our world from heaven and gives Himself to you body and blood.

Consider that the wisemen traveled some 900 miles to behold for themselves this salvation. Consider the expense to them, the dangers, the investment of time, the effort, the research – because this Savior had come for them – even them. They were convinced of it. Therefore, you also, dear Christian, pursue it, own it, live it, prize it, treasure it, fill yourself up with it, enjoy it, breathe it deeply in and find rest and peace in it. You had no right to expect salvation, but the Savior has included you, even you.