

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 saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' " Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I'm sure I've told you the story of the young man who wrote his sweetheart a letter, saying wonderful things like: "My dearest beloved. You are so precious to me, that nothing can keep me from you. For a glimpse of you, I would swim the deepest river. To feel the touch of your hand, I would climb the highest mountain. Just to be near you I would journey through the darkest jungle or the blackest night. I love you so very, very much. PS. I will come and see you on Thursday, if it doesn't rain."

It is one thing to talk about how far you would go for someone. It is another to show just how far you will go for the sake of the one you love. This past Christmas Day we talked about all that our Saviour did because of His great love for us. We spoke of His journey from heaven to earth; of how He left the glory of heaven to be born in a lowly manger. He set aside the praise and honour He received from the whole host of heaven, and instead was *despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.* (Isaiah 53:3 - ESV) We also remembered on Christmas Day the journey that Jesus made from the cradle to the cross, for He comes to give His life as a ransom for all of sinful mankind. Jesus didn't just talk about His love for us. He went to great lengths to show His great love for us—both through His humble submission to His Father's will, as He is born of a virgin mother; and then as He suffers that cruel, painful death of the cross to pay for your sins and my sins.

We rejoice in this loving Lord who went to such great lengths for us—from the cradle to the cross, from the cross to the grave and even into hell—although not to suffer, but to declare His victory over our worst enemy, the devil. That is why, on this Epiphany Sunday, we hear Isaiah tell us: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.* (Isaiah 60:1-2 - ESV) In the glory of His light, God makes known to us the wonderful news that He has come among us to save us. He has come to bring light to our dark lives—and to our even darker hearts. He has come to bring hope in the midst of the pain, the sorrow and the death of this world. As the words of one hymn say: *Jesus has come and brings pleasure eternal.* (LSB 533)

Epiphany continues the message of Christmas as we remember another journey—the journey of those wise men who came to get a glimpse of the glorious, newborn king. There is a great deal we don't know about these visitors from the East. Oh, we have many traditions that surround their visit. We sing the carol, "*We Three Kings*", but they weren't kings, and we have no idea if there were three of them or, as one tradition suggests, there were actually twelve of them. We don't know exactly where they came from, although most scholars assume that they came from Persia or Babylon, where the study of astronomy was at its highest peak. Even though we put them in our manger scenes, the truth is that it was likely months or even over a year before they saw the Christ-Child.

What does matter for us today is that these visitors made this great journey and want to know "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*" Their visit was prophesied by Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson today. That visit testifies to the truth that Christ has come to redeem all of lost and sinful mankind, Jew and Gentile alike.

As we remember the journey of the wise men, who longed to see and worship Christ we should ask ourselves: how far will we go to bring Him our worship? What would we do to behold His glorious presence? What will we give to honour Him who is our life and our salvation?

To get an appreciation for the journey of the wise men, we need to remember that they did not have the quick and convenient means of transportation we have today. There were no planes, trains and automobiles; no Holiday Inns or truck stops along their route. Travel had to be planned to follow the oases where they would need to rest and to water their animals. They had to guard against the heat of the sun, the cool of the night and the potential dangerous animals along the route. They had to take all of their food and supplies with them. The journey may have been as much as 800 kilometres—and in the slow-moving caravan in which they would have travelled, the journey would have taken them weeks. They did not have a GPS system, although God provided something better in the star that went before them to guide them to the Christ child.

Their long journey brought them to Jerusalem, for it would have seemed logical to them to think that they would find the newborn king in Israel's capital. But when they ask about the newborn King at Herod's palace, Herod and his advisors can only provide a rough answer based on the promise of God through the prophet Micah: ***“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”*** (Micah 5:2, ESV) God gave His people the signs that would point to the Saviour. He did tell them where Christ would be born. Even though Jerusalem is only 8 kilometres from Bethlehem, the people of that great city have no idea of the miracle God has worked there for their good. They have not bothered to watch for, or to make that journey to see and worship, their Redeemer and their King. Yet these foreigners, who don't have the fullness of God's Word; who do not have the privilege of God's chosen people—they are the ones who make all the efforts to come to worship, and to give their gifts to the king of heaven and earth.

What about us? Do we take for granted the Lord's grace and mercy? It is this contrast between the dedicated search of those pagan scholars and the indifference of the people of Jerusalem that reminds us that we often fail to take advantage of the precious gift God has set so close and so accessible to us. God directs us to His Son through the Word He has given us. Paul reminds us, ***“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”*** (Romans 10:8 - ESV) God has provided such easy access to His grace in Christ. We have our warm churches and comfortable pews. We have easy travel to church. We can be at church worshipping our God in a matter of minutes, not weeks. And yet we are far too much like those people of Jerusalem. We give little or no thought to the marvels that God sets before us. We don't make the efforts to come and worship Him as we should. We grumble and complain if the sermon and the service go too long. We let so many other things become more important than taking time to worship our God. We forget the life we have as the baptized children of God. We don't feed that life through our study of His Word, our hearing of that Word, or through our use of His precious Sacraments. Like the young man who can claim all the things he would do for love, yet be put off by a rainy day, so we let the things of the world get in the way of our worship of God.

So how far would you go? How far *will* you go? The psalmist says: ***Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.*** (Psalm 119:97 - ESV) I am not saying that we have to be sitting in church 24/7, but we do need to rededicate ourselves to God and His Word. Jesus told His disciples ***“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”*** (Luke 11:28 - ESV) In this new year, I hope and pray that you will give some serious thought to how far you will go to worship your Lord. Christ has come to bring you His peace and joy. He has come to take away your sin. He bore the shame of the cross so that you can be forgiven. And He came alive out of that tomb to call you from the grave in which you will eventually lie, to the fulness of life in Him. If a bunch of pagan astronomers thought it important enough to spend the time travelling to Jerusalem; if they were willing to undertake the cost of such a journey and to face the risks of this trip; then how much more should we be willing to go the distance for our Lord. After all, we know something they didn't know. Through the Holy Spirit we know that ***God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*** (2 Corinthians 4:6 - ESV)

There is no greater blessing than to know the brightness of the light of Life that is Jesus Christ. There is no greater joy than being His redeemed child. There is no greater treasure than that which God has given us through His Son. So how far would you go? There may be a time when God will call you to some great and glorious undertaking for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But even now He calls you to be as wise as the wise men. Let nothing hinder you from coming to worship Christ your King. Let nothing keep you from laying your gifts before God. And don't let the devil, the world, or the misguided desires of your heart keep you from Him who is your life, your peace and your salvation. May God grant that we are as excited about the King of Kings as the wise men were! Amen.

