

*“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 admit that we are jumping the gun a bit, but we are observing the festival of the Epiphany today. This day in the church calendar has come to be a ‘second Christmas’, and is the Christmas for many of the eastern Orthodox churches. The word Epiphany comes from a word which means “appearance” or “manifestation”, and we remember how God made known His gift of salvation to the world, symbolized by the wise men, who came to see *he who has been born king of the Jews*. We also see Jesus made known as the Eternal Son, True God, but also True Man.

Although the visit of the wise men is a well known part of the Christmas account, we actually know very little about these visitors from the east. We do not know exactly where they came from, or who many there were, or even their names, although there is a great deal of traditional lore about them. Those traditions say that there were three wise men, who were also kings. Deaconess Miriam and I were joking about the fact that we both learned the traditional names of the magi from a Christmas album by Mario Lanza, where they are identified as Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. We know that as magi they were a special class of scholars and wise men. We know that they were led by their wisdom to seek the newborn Christ-child and worship Him. Magi, as well-educated individuals, were often the trusted advisors of kings and rulers. They were men devoted to study. I suppose we could say that wisdom and education were their religion. They studied all disciplines, all wisdom, all teaching. It does seem, though, that astronomy was important to the magi of Scripture. They were men who watched the heavens, believing that the stars held messages for mankind, although not in the crass way of our horoscopes today.

One of their beliefs was that every great king would be announced by a new star. It is here that God reaches them. In His mercy and love for all people, wanting all people to know of His salvation in Jesus Christ, God reaches out to these foreigners. We need to remember that horoscopes are bunk, and that astrology is opposed to God’s will. We can’t predict the future from the stars. But God did use a star to get the attention of these astronomers—and this star is different. One night, as they gazed at the sky, these men see a bright new star; a spectacular light in the heavens. Astronomers (again, not the astrologers of horoscopes) suggest that there is a possible explanation for this event. Every 805 years, there is an extraordinary, repeated conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. These planets would have been in conjunction in the year 7 BC; two years before the best date of Christ’s birth. To the magi, who studied the stars, this was a dramatic scene. But even more important was that the interpretation of this event would lead them to worship Christ. These men were familiar with the Jewish teachings; after all, the Jews had been captives in Babylon for 70 years, and did have an influence on that area. They may have known the prophecy that God had given His people: *“a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”* (Numbers 24:17, ESV) Their own interpretation may have come from the fact that Jupiter was to be the king’s planet, for it represented the highest god and ruler of the universe known to the pagans—the god Marduk of Babylon; Zeus to the Greeks and Jupiter to the Romans. The ringed planet Saturn was thought of as the defender of Palestine. These two planets came together in the constellation of Pisces, which represented extraordinary events or crises. So, the magi would understand that a divine ruler would come to Palestine at a time of a special and significant event in world history.

Seeing the miraculous heavenly sign, these men make a long and difficult journey to come and worship Jesus. They were wise

enough to know this was not an event to be missed. They leave the comfort and security of home, and undertake the expense and struggle of the trip to Jerusalem. Led by the star, which God sent before them, they came to Jerusalem.

When they came to Jerusalem, they went to the palace—after all, where would one expect to find a king? Yet Herod and his advisors seemed indifferent to the very promises they should have known from Holy Scripture. Even though the newborn King and Saviour was just a few miles away, they are indifferent to his appearance. Herod doesn't care that God has sent a Saviour, although he is more than annoyed at the thought of anyone trying to take the throne from him.

There is a great deal we can learn through the contrast of the wise men with Herod and his court. How many in our world are like Herod: indifferent to the wondrous things God has done and continues to do in all of creation? How many are so caught up in themselves that they have no time or interest in such “silly” things as religion and faith? The Pew Research Center does some of the best and most thorough work looking at religious trends. It is hard to find data for Canada, but while there does seem to be a levelling of religious decline in the US, Canada is still in decline. There are some indications that faith is becoming important to young people, but the statistics aren't clear enough to establish a trend. Unfortunately, we see that many people see themselves as spiritual, but not religious. More and more, Canadians say they do not consider religion important. Yet they want to see themselves as spiritual.

There is a difference between spirituality and faith. Scripture reminds us: ***“faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*** (Romans 10:17, ESV) But since so many think we are wiser than the people of Jesus' day, they look inward, thinking that what they feel or see as important is what makes them spiritual. We know better than those wise men, so we aren't led by silly myth or superstitions. We trust our own understanding of everything. We worship the triune Me, Myself and I. We think church and religion is dull, but we think we are uniquely interesting. That is why, more and more, we set aside the truth of God for the truth of man—for our own brand of truth! We have become like Herod's advisors, or like the chief priest and religious leaders of Jesus' day. They thought they knew all the answers. They trusted their own wisdom. They weren't looking for a Saviour, because they didn't think they needed a Saviour.

Where is this leading us? There are many who find religious decline to be something good. They are convinced that this allows for more rational thinking and enlightenment. In the minds of many atheists, people who see themselves as spiritual but not religious will take another step toward really thinking about what it means that someone made everything out of nothing and did all these magical things.

In the world's view of wisdom, anyone who would follow a star to find a newborn king isn't all that smart. Anyone who would believe that God became man, born of a virgin mother, really doesn't know what they are saying. And people who believe that we can be saved only through the death of the sinless Son of God on the cross and then believe that He rose again from the dead are viewed by the world as the most foolish of people.

My dear people, loved by God, you need to know that the wise still worship Christ. The psalmist reminds us: ***“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!”*** (Psalm 111:10, ESV) St. Paul will also assure us, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that ***“the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”*** (1 Corinthians 1:25, ESV) True wisdom comes from God, who alone is omniscient, or all-knowing. The wise man is not the one who thinks he is too smart to believe in God; rather, the wise man is the one who learns from what God Himself has said. The magi who came to worship Christ were willing to learn from God, and they were blessed through their journey.

The wise still worship Christ. God still leads people to the Christ-child. He doesn't use the star, as He did so long ago. Rather, He points us to a greater light. Paul reminded Timothy: ***“from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”*** (2 Timothy 3:15, ESV) God leads us to faith through His Word. How blessed we are that when we read, mark, learn and take to heart that Word the Holy Spirit is at work to strengthen us in God's wisdom! We should be filled with joy as we study that Word and hear it proclaimed in our services, as the wise men rejoiced when they saw the star which led them to the Baby, who is the King of all creation. On this LWML Sunday we also rejoice in the women of our church who rejoice in the Christ, born for them and who seek to point others to that Saviour and Lord.

When people simply want to be spiritual, and not religious; when they don't want to be led by the Bible or by the teaching of a church, they really let their own wisdom get in the way of faith and God's truth. When we think we know better than God,

then we no longer obey His Word. The self-proclaimed wise men of our day say they don't care what God says; they know what they know and they think what they think—and they believe they know best.

When the world's wisdom leads us from God; when science or philosophy interfere with faith, then wisdom becomes foolishness. By contrast, the wise men were just that—they were wise. They were scholars. Thankfully, their wisdom led them to the source of all wisdom; to a Baby, but more than a baby. It lead them to the Saviour of the world. In the same way, the wise still worship Christ, rejoicing to know that in Jesus Christ, God has come from earth to heaven. He has come to save us. He has come to forgive our sins through His sacrifice on the cross. He has come to give us life through His resurrection from the dead. This isn't myth or legend. This is the true wisdom of God! And yes, the truly wise person is the one who journeys with the wise men, rejoicing in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Amen.