

The Epiphany of Our Lord (transferred)

Sunday, January 7, 2018

Isaiah 60:6, **“A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good tidings, the praises of the Lord.”**

Dear Christians,

Much has been made of the gifts the Wise Men brought to the baby Jesus—gold, frankincense and myrrh. Because of the three gifts, it is assumed, although we don't know, that there were three Wise Men. And so, no nativity set is complete without the three Wise Men there at the stable with gifts in hand.

Some have even assigned significance to the gifts. The gold was given to Jesus to show that He was the newborn King of a kingdom filled with riches—the riches of God's grace. Frankincense was burned by the priests as part of the daily sacrifices in the Temple. And so Jesus was given frankincense because, as our High Priest, He would sacrifice Himself to atone for our sins. Myrrh, used to anoint dead bodies, was given to Jesus to prophesy that He would taste death and the grave for us.

But according to Isaiah, the Wise Men brought with them more than just gold and frankincense and myrrh. Isaiah writes, **“They shall bring gold and frankincense, AND shall bring good tidings, the praises of the Lord.”** When the Wise Men set out for Israel, their bags were loaded with gold and frankincense and myrrh. But their hearts and their minds and their mouths were loaded with good tidings, the praises of the Lord, the birth of the King of the Jews and the Savior of the world.

And sure enough, before they presented to Jesus gold and frankincense and myrrh; they presented to the people of Israel good tidings. The first gift they gave at their journey's end was the Gospel. When they hit Jerusalem, they started proclaiming the good tidings and the praises of the Lord. **“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”**

The good tidings they proclaimed weren't lost on the chief priests and the scribes. They understood that the Wise Men were talking about the long-promised, long-awaited Christ. To answer the Wise Men's question, they quoted Micah 5, **“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.”** Micah goes on to declare that Jesus will be great to the ends of the earth; that in Him they shall dwell secure; and that He will be their peace. Good tidings indeed!

When the Wise Men finally arrived at Bethlehem and were led by the star to the very house where Jesus was, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy! They went into the house. They saw the child with Mary, His mother. But before they opened their treasures and offered Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they fell down and worshiped Him. How did they worship Him? What did they do? What form did that worship take? They worshipped Jesus by proclaiming His praises; by proclaiming again

the good tidings of who He was—the Son of God, in human flesh and blood; and what He had come to do—establish God’s kingdom of grace and mercy for sinners the world over.

When you think about it—throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons just past, and today, Epiphany Sunday—we have bumped into person after person who brought good tidings, the praises of the Lord. There has been a parade of people these last six weeks in the Church year who heard the good tidings about Jesus and proclaimed the good tidings about Jesus.

The Word of the Lord came to John the Baptist and He proclaimed good tidings—that One was coming after him, who was mightier than him, who would take away from sinners their sin and give to sinners His Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel proclaimed good tidings to Mary—that Jesus, her son, would be called holy, the Son of God, and that His kingdom would have no end.

The angel proclaimed good tidings to the shepherds in the field outside of Bethlehem, **“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”** The chorus of angels proclaimed good tidings in song on Christmas Eve, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men.”**

The shepherds in turn proclaimed the good tidings they had been told concerning the infant Jesus. Simeon held the baby Jesus in His arms and proclaimed the good tidings that his eyes had seen the salvation of God and that now he could go to his grave in peace. Anna proclaimed the good tidings about Jesus to all who had been waiting for their Redeemer and their redemption from sin. And now, today, the Wise Men proclaim good tidings, the praises of the Lord.

So what did you and I bring to others this Christmas season? Gifts—but not good tidings? Pricey stuff like gold—but not God’s priceless, yet free, salvation? Good smelling stuff like frankincense and myrrh—but not the pleasing aroma of Christ’s atoning sacrifice for us sinners?

What did you and I proclaim this Christmas season? “Happy Holidays!” “Merry Christmas!” Generic talk about love and peace void of and detached from Jesus? The good tidings of a record-setting stock market, economic growth, record low unemployment, and tax reform?

Not that there’s anything wrong with gifts that are pricey or good-smelling. Not that there’s anything wrong with exchanging “Happy Holidays” and “Merry Christmas” with our neighbors, performing acts of love for them, or trying to cultivate peace with them. Not that we shouldn’t be optimistic about the improved economic conditions in our country.

But just as the most important thing the Wise Men brought with them was the good tidings about Jesus, so it ought to be for us. The temptation for us, in our

increasingly secularized society, is that the good tidings concerning Jesus; the good tidings that we hear from the mouth of John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel, the Christmas angels, the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the Wise Men—those good tidings are less and less the centerpiece of our Christmas celebrations and our daily lives.

Maybe we didn't bring the good tidings of Jesus to others because we didn't seek them out for ourselves. Maybe the reason the good tidings of Jesus didn't pour out of our mouths is because we didn't fill our ears and hearts with them during the Advent and Christmas seasons. Maybe we were too preoccupied with gold and frankincense and myrrh and not occupied enough with good tidings, the praises of the Lord.

I have been alarmed now, for several years, not just at the declining attendance at our weekly Sunday services, but at the declining attendance at our Christmas services. Granted, the cold weather didn't help. Christmas Eve falling on a Sunday didn't help. All the sickness going around didn't help. But, under 200 people at both Christmas Eve services combined? Less than 50 people on Christmas Day? 21 in the house of God on New Year's Eve? Really?

Have we suddenly become immune to our sinful flesh and resistant to the devil's temptations? A quick look at our hearts, our families, and our congregation will tell us that's not the case. Have we become bullet-proof and incapable of dying? This past December sadly revealed the fallacy in thinking that. Has the world suddenly become a place of perfect love and unity, peace and safety? 15 minutes of FOX News will prove that's a mistaken notion.

No, we need the good tidings that the Wise Men brought with them. We need the good tidings that we heard throughout the Christmas season and that we are hearing again today. We need the good tidings that Jesus was born to establish Himself as the eternal King of God's eternal kingdom in which we receive eternal life. We need the good tidings that a Savior who saved us sinners and a Shepherd who shepherds us lost sheep has been born. We need the good tidings that we, God's enemies, have been reconciled to God by Christ's cross and empty tomb; that we are now at peace with Him and the happy recipients of His undeserved favor and forgiveness. We need the good tidings that Jesus has redeemed us and made us God's adopted sons and heirs. We need the good tidings that in Jesus, our salvation, we can live secure and die in peace.

Your neighbors need those same good tidings. Martin Luther comments, "...the special work of a Christian is to confess his sins and his shame, and to proclaim God's grace and work in himself." We, like the Wise Men, have much more to give to our neighbors than just nice gifts. We can bring to them what the Wise Men brought--good tidings, the praises of the Lord.

In Jesus' name
Amen