

The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2016
Matthew 2:1-12

“Gentile’s Christmas”

Today closes out the twelve days of Christmas as those first Gentile visitors come and worship the Christ Child, bearing their extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Sometimes this twelfth day of Christmas, or the Epiphany of our Lord as it is rightly called, is also called “Gentile’s Christmas.” It is so called because those wise men were the first non-Jewish people, or Gentiles, to come and worship the Christ. And we, as non-Jewish people, Gentiles, follow in their train. Like those wise men, we **“have come to worship him”** (Matthew 2:2). And so the theme for this message is entitled “Gentile’s Christmas.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

In a sermon of his on this same text for Epiphany, Luther once preached: “Now the Wise Men had faith to follow the word of the Prophet Micah. They were not offended that the king was not born in Jerusalem. They left the Temple and went to a cow stall. If I had been there, I would have stayed in the Temple and said: ‘God dwell here and if the Child is to be found anywhere in the world, it will be where all the priests are gathered and God is served.’ We may profit from the example of these heathen, who took no offense when directed from Jerusalem, the great city, to little Bethlehem. They followed the Word, and God comforted them by putting back the star, which led them now to Bethlehem and to the very door where the young Child lay” (*The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, translated and arranged by Roland H. Bainton. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958; p. 62). But how did these outsiders, these Gentiles, know about the Word? How did they become familiar with the prophets? How did they put two and two together and travel so far to come and worship Christ? There are many myths surrounding the wise men, including that there were three in number (based on the number of gifts) and that they were kings; that their names were Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior; that they were from the Far East, the Middle East, and the West (Europe); and that they were of three different ages in life: youth, prime, and age. All of this is the stuff of legend. What we do know is that the wise men (μάγοι – see Matthew 2:1) were learned, wealthy, and influential people who came from the royal courts of Persia and Babylon, in what is now Iran and Iraq. They studied the stars and heavenly bodies as these were believed to influence the course of human affairs. In all likelihood, they became familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures when God’s people were deported from Jerusalem and Judea to Babylon beginning in 592 B.C., taking their Scriptures with them and the promise of a Messiah who would rescue and redeem his chosen people. Surely the hand of the Lord was in all of this, guiding the wise men to know the truth of his Word during the time of his people’s exile.

Think of it: up until the coming of those mysterious Gentile visitors from the East, the birth of Jesus was a very localized event, confined to a few shepherds who had been told by an angel that **“unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:11). Although the wise men were prestigious VIPs with money and clout, they were still Gentiles. They were unclean outsiders to Israel. They were looked upon with scorn and derision by Israel. And yet, here they come, following the star and **“going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him”** (Matthew 2:11a). They may not have had the pedigree as children of Abraham, but they surely had the faith of Abraham. And now who are those outsiders today whom we may look upon with scorn and derision? Who are those whom we may deem unworthy of God and question whether they are good enough to enter into the Lord’s presence? Oh, we may not say this out loud to anyone, but we may well think it within our hearts and minds. Let us never forget the words of the angel on that first Christmas night: **“... I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people”** (Luke 2:10b). All the people – all those for whom Christ was born, and all those for whom Christ would die. All the people. Was God doing a new thing here? Yes and no! In giving his only begotten Son into human flesh,

God was indeed doing something radically new. But God was doing an old thing by drawing all people – Jews and Gentiles – and making good on his promise of salvation. In truth, this had always been God’s design and plan. It still is. And it centers upon the gift of that Child; the One who is the Light of the world.

The gifts which we give to one another at Christmas have their origins in the gifts which the wise men presented to the Christ Child. They may not be so costly or extravagant as gold, frankincense, or myrrh, but what price can we put upon gifts that are given in love? Inspired by the gifts of love given by the wise men to honor Jesus, what gift do we bring today to honor him? As Luther wrote: “We can present our gifts in the same way as the Lord says: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’ He who gives of his goods to help the poor, to send children to school, to educate them in God’s Word and other arts that we may have good ministers – he is giving to the Baby Jesus” (Ibid, p. 65). Whether we be Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, the gifts we give to the Baby Jesus pale in comparison to the gift which he has given to us: the gift of his very life for us and for our salvation.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was an influential twentieth-century African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader. He was Dean of Chapel at Howard University and Boston University for more than two decades, wrote twenty-one books, and in 1944 helped found a multicultural church. Thurman, along with Mordecai Johnson and Vernon Johns, was considered one of the three greatest African-American preachers in the early 20th-century. Thurman’s poem “The Work of Christmas” was published posthumously in a book titled *The Mood of Christmas* (1985):

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.*

As this Christmas season draws to a close, let us go and do for our neighbor what Christ has done for us: to give ourselves away in humble and loving service. And so we carry Christmas Day into every day of this new year. Amen.