

Epiphany Sunday
January 5, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Make a Careful Search for the Child

Matthew 2:1–12 (NIV84)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Dear Friends in Christ,

When the calendar turns from one year to the next, people tend to think about ways to make the new year a better year. Maybe they make one of those resolution things, or maybe they just set some goals and plans for what they would like to do better in the new year. If your plan is related to better health, one might consult experts on diet and exercise by reading their books or talking to a health professional. If you want to grow in your career you would listen to those who have done well in that field, read some books, get some training from experts. If I wanted to grow in my pastoral abilities I would go to learn from confessional Lutheran theologians and pastors. You want experts in the field to advise you on how to improve.

I would certainly not take advice about being a Lutheran pastor from those who are not Lutheran. I would avoid at all costs the advice of those who are not Christian. But today, I am asking you to take the advice of one who hates Christ. Herod plotted evil against Jesus, but his advice is good on its own. He told the Magi, “Make a careful search for the Child.” We will be blessed by following his advice but not his intentions. Let this be our goal for life – Make a Careful Search for the Child.

Not Like Herod

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in

the east and have come to worship him.”³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod's first reaction to Christ's birth is disturbance. Herod is upset by the birth of a child. It seems like a strange reaction to the news that the Savior has been born. But it is unfortunately, not a strange reaction to Christ in this world of sin. Herod sees Jesus, the King of the Jews, as a threat to Herod's way of life. Jesus is therefore an enemy to be dealt with instead of a Savior to rejoice in. That is why Herod is disturbed. And everyone in Jerusalem knows what happens when Herod is disturbed. There will be bloodshed as he fights against his real or perceived enemies.

After Herod brings in his experts to find out where the Christ is to be born (We'll get to those experts soon), he plots against the newborn King of the Jews.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

Of course, Herod has no intention of worshipping Jesus. He wants to find the Child and kill the Child. This is why he tells the Magi to make a careful search for the Child. Still today there are those who carefully search for Jesus with evil intentions. Some will search the Bible for ammunition to make Christians look foolish. “You mean, you really believe this stuff about water turning into wine, miraculous healings and people rising from the dead. How foolish are you?!” Or they search for things in the Bible that don't match up with popular culture in order to show how backwards and out of touch the Bible is. They claim that the God of the Bible is a terrible monster who advocates genocide, slavery and hates women. These enemies of Christ only search for him in order to destroy people's faith in the Child born in Bethlehem just as Herod wanted to do.

Our own sinful nature is the same. If you wanted to name your sinful nature you could call it the old Adam as Scripture does. But if you want to give it a nickname, call it Herod. The only reason our sinful nature would search for Christ is to eliminate him from our lives. So when there is an opportunity to worship Christ by reading his Word, our sinful nature buries our Bible at the end of a long to-do list so it is never done. Our sinful nature looks for ways to get us out of contact with Jesus at church. Maybe someone is singing off key or the wrong tune completely. Maybe a child makes annoying noise during the service. Maybe someone gives us a funny look. And our sinful nature, that old Herod, tells us to stay home where we are comfortable.

Lord, we repent of the times we have searched for the Child with bad intentions.

Not Like the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law

And not like the chief priests and teachers of the law.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:⁶ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel. ’’

Herod goes to the experts and these guys know where to look. They look in the Bible to find out where the Christ is to be born. They know Micah’s prophecy that the Savior will be born in Bethlehem. These experts in the law of God know God’s Word but do they trust it? Do they believe it? Hard to tell.

The Magi have just told them that the Christ has been born and now they know where he is. Shouldn’t there be some reaction by the teachers of the law? Maybe they would go off to Jerusalem in search of the Child born to be their Savior. The shepherds ran to Bethlehem when the angels announced Christ’s birth. The Magi traveled many miles when the star appeared. But for the chief priests and teachers of the law who knew the Bible so well...no reaction is recorded.

Many of us here today learned the Scriptures from a very young age. We went to Sunday school, learned the stories, memorized passages, recited our parts for the Christmas Eve program. We memorized more in order to be confirmed. Jesus found us in baptism and we know who he is and what he has done. He is the Christ who paid for our sins by his death on the cross. And here is where the devil and our sinful nature (Herod) wants us to stop. “Why make a careful search for the Child? We already know lots about Jesus. What more is there to know?”

And lazy Christianity sets in. We stop searching the Scriptures for Christ because we did that once already. We get lazy about finding Jesus in the Lord’s Supper because we’ve done that before too. We are not as eager to run to worship and receive Christ’s forgiveness because we’ve done that many times before and I can always go next week, or next month or next year.

We just heard the angels announce Christ’s birth to the shepherds near Bethlehem. We saw them run to their Savior’s manger. Mary pondered these things in her heart. The Magi follow the star. We love Christmas! But now that it is over, our sinful nature wants to put Christ away and make his birth just a nice story. We can always get back to Jesus later...but sometimes later never comes.

Lord, help us to make a careful search for the child, not like Herod, not like the experts in the law, but like the Magi.

But Like the Magi

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

We are not sure how much the Magi knew of Jesus’ mission. The Old Testament prophecies of the Christ may have been passed down to them from when Daniel was in Babylon and Persia. But we know what this Child did for the world. Jesus took upon himself the punishment for every sin. He suffered and died to redeem us and all people. He died and then rose to give eternal life to sinners who had been destined for eternal death. There is no other Savior besides the Child born in Bethlehem, the

one the Magi traveled to worship.

So with the Magi, we do not let distance keep us from searching for the Child. They traveled for months. We may drive an hour to church or walk for 30 seconds. The distance may only be to the other side of the room to grab the Bible to search for Jesus. Trusting in Christ and his forgiveness we do not let the devil or our sinful nature keep us from going to the Christ Child every day.

Like the Magi we lay down our own intellect as we marvel at God's salvation through the Son of God born as a human Child. Don't let the world tell us that God is a monster or that the Bible is out of date. The God of the Bible is just but shows himself to be full of mercy and grace through the Child worshiped by the Magi.

Like the Magi we find our Savior in humble places. Jesus was not living in the capital city of Jerusalem or in a palace. He lived with Mary and Joseph in a simple home in Bethlehem. We do not have to go on some great quest to find Christ or perform some amazing deed to find Christ. He comes to us in the water and Word of Baptism. He brings us forgiveness in bread and wine that is his body and blood. He comes to us in words written on the pages of the Bible.

The Magi followed Herod's advice to make a careful search for the Child but their plan and reaction when they found Jesus was far different than Herod's.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

May we also be overjoyed as we make a careful search for Jesus this year.

Amen.