

You Know the Secret! Matthew 2:1-12

1st Sunday after Epiphany 1/8/2012 Pastor Aaron Nitz

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests! In the name of Jesus, our newborn Lord and Savior, dear friends in Christ, I absolutely love mind teasers. I love to try and figure them out. Perhaps some of you have seen this little piece of art before. It's really an interesting thing that someone, I'm not sure who, came up with. If you've never seen something like this before at first it might look like a bunch of jibberish or perhaps some letters of a foreign language like Chinese or Korean. But it's actually quite simple. Once someone tells you or shows you what it says, your eyes will almost automatically see it every time and you might shake your head like you can't believe you didn't see it the first time. Well if you look closely there is a J and an E and an S and a U and another S. Now you see it because I revealed to you the message, I didn't change the message- it was there all along, but you needed someone to point it out to you. In a similar way we thank the Lord for revealing to us the truth. He does everything for our salvation, He puts His message in our world, then He reveals it to us, just like He did to some Magi believers a couple thousand years ago.

Perhaps we've heard this account hundreds of times in our lives. Perhaps we think, "We've heard it once; what more is there to discover anew?" It can be easy for us to just brush by certain portions of God's Word and think, "That's all old news... tell me something I don't already know, pastor!" But if we think about this Scripture for a little longer than a passing glance we'll notice all sorts of surprises and mysteries and questions. Yet, in the midst of all these perplexities and seeming difficulties we discover that the whole truth of the account of these Magi is actually quite easily acceptable and understandable... at least to us. Some wise men from a distant country were led by a star sent by God to this insignificant nation of Israel or Judah and this star directed them to the new born Savior of all people and they, out of gratitude and thanks to God, worship and present to him extravagant gifts and then return to their country thwarting the evil intentions of Herod the wicked king. In the clearest way we see that this new born Savior is not just the Savior of the poor and lowly like Joseph and Mary, but also the Savior of the wise and rich. He's not just the Savior of the Jewish people, but the Savior of Gentile people too, Gentiles like these Magi, and Gentiles like you and me. But in the midst of this well-known account that we've heard perhaps hundreds of times there are all kinds of surprises and mysteries and questions, aren't there?

First of all, who in the world are these Magi and how did they know so much? Why is it that God would use a star to lead them to Israel? How come they weren't discouraged and disheartened when after their long trip they arrived at Jerusalem, the capital city, and no one knew what they were talking about and were afraid at their news? Why didn't the priests and the scribes go with them to Bethlehem to see the Scriptures fulfilled before their eyes? How come Herod didn't just send a troop of soldiers with the Magi in order that this "threat" to his throne might not escape? And why in the world did the Magi, after seeing their Savior, leave? So many questions and mysteries and surprises!! The Savior's glory is hidden in mysteries and yet at the same time it's revealed to some, isn't it?

Who knows how these Magi knew the truth. We don't know exactly who they are except that they are from the East. It seems likely that they came from around the ancient city of Babylon (modern day Iraq), that would've been in the East. Perhaps there they had heard God's message from OT believers, like Daniel, who had been exiled there for 70 years in the 6th Century BC. Perhaps they had learned from the OT that a star would signify the birth of the Savior. God had already foretold that a star would rise out of Judah through the prophecy from the prophet named Balaam in Numbers 16, "**I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.**" By whatever way, God had revealed to them the truth and they set out to worship the newborn King.

Now imagine you are one of these Magi. You arrive at Jerusalem after a long journey. You've been traveling for many days over many miles and you're longing to see with your own eyes your King and Savior. You show up in Jerusalem, the capital city, and ask where you can find the King. And yet...no one knows what you're talking about! Everybody is ignorant of the great event that had just happened! The people who ought to have known it best had no clue! And not only that, but your news causes fear and alarm all around the city! A little background on king Herod here might be in order: Herod was actually not an Israelite, he was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, not a true descendant of Israel or of king David for that matter. Yet, for political reasons it seems, he had joined the Jewish religion and the Romans allowed him on throne over the nation of Israel. Herod, though a seemingly powerful ruler who ruled with fear, deceit, and murder, also seems quite insecure. Especially later in his life he becomes extremely paranoid that someone might kill him in order to take his position of power; records seem to indicate that he

murdered his wife, 3 sons, a mother-in-law, a brother-in-law, an uncle, and many others. So you can already understand why he and all of Jerusalem with him were disturbed to find out that a new King was born in their land.

So Herod calls together all of the religious officials and they look in Scripture and find out that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem, a city of humble origins, the same city where young and unlikely David was anointed by Samuel to be the next king of Israel (2 Samuel 16). So the Magi directed by God's Word are able to continue their journey to worship the King. Now think about this. Some Magi arrive looking for the Christ who has just been born, the religious leaders look in God's Word and correctly see Bethlehem to be the place, and...only the Magi go! No one joins them or goes with them even though they had ample reason to run to Bethlehem and see what has happened, although they were staring right at God's message, they had His Word, the Savior was born among them, yet they missed all of it! They rejected the message, refused to take it to heart, perfectly content living their lives without the Christ.

How sad it is that the very people who should have known God's Words and promises best completely missed the very Savior right among them! But, let us not forget that what is once seen can be lost. What is once comprehended can be forgotten. No doubt, after a long time of not being reminded of what this piece of art actually says one could forget and once again only see gibberish. The same is true for us. If we become lackadaisical or lazy spiritually, God's sign to us, His Word, could soon look like gibberish. There were many in Israel, though they had God's Word and the prophecies God had made, refused to see in the baby Jesus anything spectacular. They even quoted from God's Word itself the very prophecy that marked the place of the long awaited Christ's birthplace, but no one went along to find Him. So this account of the Magi is both a fulfillment of a prophecy and a prophecy itself. Jesus would one day say, **"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (Matthew 8:11-12). The warning is there for us as well: if we don't use God's Word we could very well soon lose it, like the chief priests and teachers of the law.

Rather, let us be like the Magi. They kept going undiscouraged. They saw the star again and were filled with joy. They saw the message, they understood the secret, they knew what all this meant, they knew who this Baby really is. And what grace God showed them! They got to see their salvation, worship him, and had the privilege and honor of giving their treasures to the most important Treasure ever.

Perhaps there are things in our lives that tempt us to be discouraged. There are times in our own lives when we realize most clearly when our plans don't work out the way we've planned and we realize once again that God's ways are not our ways. And even when we look at the world around us that is filled with so much ignorance when it comes to God and His Word- many un-Christian churches that promote a salvation other than through Christ, even Christian churches that twist God's Word to say what they want it to say. Many people claim to be Christian and don't live like it. Often we're tempted to feel discouraged in a world that seems to be ignorant of God's truth and love. Perhaps we are tempted to feel: what's the point of it all? Why should I live as a Christian?

The Magi believers were also met with discouraging news, but it didn't discourage them. The very people who should have known the truth didn't get it, had the Magi given up and gone home they would have missed out on seeing God's grace and love. Even though it seems no one went with them, they went, they saw, they believed, and they were blessed. In our world full of doubts and deception and discouragements, don't be discouraged! Why? Because look at God's love and mercy. Though many may stare blankly at God's message, His Word, His Sacraments, the Means He uses to come to us, you know the secret! God has revealed the secret to you! You know that in the Word God strengthens you, equips you, nurtures you, and gives you joy! You know God gives you forgiveness in the Supper! You know that He washed you clean in Baptism! Indeed, you know the secrets! God in grace has revealed the truth to you. Don't be discouraged!

You know the secret because God has revealed it to you! God has called you by the gospel, enlightened you with his gifts, sanctified and kept you in the true faith! No, God didn't use a star to bring you to faith in Him, but He did use the "sign" of His Word. His Word leads you again and again to the manger to see your Savior, His Word guides you to Bethlehem to see far more than an ordinary Child, but the Redeemer, the Savior, His Word allows you to gaze at glimpses of glory, His Word lets you see the shimmers of the bright, shining brilliance of eternal glory in heaven that awaits you! Many have come and gone in our world who have rejected God's "signs" and refused His message and have missed out on eternal glory. Many...but not you! God has called you to faith in Him, you see the hidden glory, you know your Savior, give thanks! You know the secret! What grace! Amen.