



RISE AND SHINE
Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Rise and shine. I heard those words more times than I care to remember from my mother – getting me up and ready for school or church. I remember the bugler at Camp Mohican playing “Revelry” and shouting out over the loud speaker, “**Rise and shine!**”

The cry of the epiphany season is “**Arise and shine – for your light has come.**” Today we read of the contrasting responses to the Light that entered the world at Bethlehem from the Wise Men and King Herod.

In our lesson today two names are held in contrast – King Herod who was called the King of the Jews by his political position – and the birth of the Messiah – the real King of the Jews. Herod has been called “**King of Jews**” by the Senate in Rome for almost 40 years. But no one called him Messiah.¹

The story of the Three Wise Men or Magi has captured the imagination of poets – artists – and musicians for centuries. The three hymns we will sing today are based on this fascinating passage of scripture. I love them all.

It has always amazed me that the Three Wise Men – or Magi – made the most crucial decision of their lives – they arose and followed the light (the star). They stopped – looked – and listened – and went in a totally new direction. The despair and darkness just could not meet and provide for the deepest needs of their souls and spirits. God said, ‘**Arise and shine**’ – and they did. What about you?

This passage of scripture remains fascinating – but sometimes it gets so overgrown with traditions that we will do well to look carefully at what the Bible says. There are some very powerful insights for us to glean and learn from our lesson today. The great hymn “**We Three Kings**” is misleading. The number **three** is not found in any text or manuscript. They did give three gifts – but there is no indication of how many were actually in their traveling party. We don’t know how they traveled. However, it is why they traveled that is at the heart of our story today. In **verse 2**, “Where is the one who has been named King of the Jews?”

Secondly, “**We Three Kings**” is misleading because these men were not kings. The Magi – or Wise Men – were a group of scholars – priests. They would have been attendants at the courts of kings in the East. The difference between science and

magic was not as well-defined as it is in our time. They were astrologers in addition to being astronomers. One of their important roles was establishing kings. It was the duty of these scholarly priests to place the crown on the head of a new king. They were the ones who set in place the structure that allowed a king to rule.

Thirdly, both the hymn and our text shares they came from the East. We don't know exactly where in the East they came from. What is being shared is that they came from the far side of the Roman Empire. They were not Jewish – they were Gentiles.²

Another tradition is that the Magi came to the stable where Jesus was laid in the manger. We read in **verse 11** that they actually visited the mother and child in a house. Since they came later – some believe up to a year later – Mary and Joseph had been able to secure housing somewhere in Bethlehem before they left for Egypt.

Lastly, all we know about the star is that it captured their attention. As astronomers and astrologers it must have been spectacular to capture their imagination and to follow it. How a star could be seen a thousand miles away – and yet stop exactly at Bethlehem had to be a God-thing.

If God could create the sun and moon and the stars and set them all into motion – surely they are at his disposal for his purposes and plan. Remember, if necessary “God will move heaven and earth to show us his will.”³

In that spirit – there are four things about the meaning of Epiphany I want to share with you today.

FIRST, CHRIST'S MISSION IS NOT FOR ISRAEL ALONE – BUT THE SALVATION OF THE WORLD.

Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus at the very beginning and ending of his gospel as a universal Messiah for all the nations. This is the fulfillment of **Isaiah 60:3** – “Nations will come to light – and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” **Isaiah 49:6** declares “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles – that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” This is the importance of their journey.

The Epiphany story is one of the greatest evangelism lessons we have. What God did in and through Israel in Jesus is not only for Israel - but for the entire world – for all people. Luke's gospel declares “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Now you see why the gospel is a threat to racism, nationalism, and all the 'isms' of the world.

In our epistle lesson from Ephesians – Paul shares in **verse 6** how in Christ the inclusion of the Gentiles was part of the eternal purposes of God. In Christ the eternal purposes previously hidden have now been revealed. St. Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus) – on the Damascus Road – sees a bright light even though it is high noon. This light is greater and more consuming than all others. Like the Magi – he arises and follows

Christ in to the mission field. His darkness and ignorance gives way to revelation and wisdom.

SECONDLY, THE HERODIAN SPIRIT CAN FILTER ITS WAY INTO OUR LIVES.

The Wise Men's search for the newborn king terrifies Herod because it means that Almighty God is at work – which means King Herod's kingdom is a shakable kingdom. No one likes to be out of control. Herod is not in control – God is. Salvation is always at work despite political and cultural forces at work to deter its message and mission. The tiny infant born in the manger is the One in whom the world will find its center and purpose.

In **verse 3** we read “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.” There is a sense in which Herod is still around today.

Percy B. Shelley, one of Great Britain's noteworthy writers in 1817, wrote a piece called “**Ozymandias.**” Shelley details an encounter with a traveler from an antique land, who – in a journey across a desert – discovers the remains of a marble statue. All that remained on the stones were two feet and the trunkless legs. Near them on the sand was the shattered remnant of what had been the head. On the broken slabs of stone was found the following inscription: “**My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my works, ye mighty and despair.**” The traveler turned to look at the mighty of the kingdom of Ozymandias but nothing could be found in any direction. Yet Ozymandias claimed the title of King of Kings.

Herod was afraid of any idea, person, place or thing that threatened the man-made kingdom he had set up. He was afraid to let ‘God’ rule in his life. His kingdom was based on fear and torture, rather than faith and love.

I believe Herod was not threatened because the Magi brought gifts, but because they fell on their knees and worshiped the newborn King.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann shares, “The birth of Jesus brings a harsh end to a Herodian reality that seemed ordained forever, and it created a new historical situation. It was their credentialing and stamp of approval that this ‘child’ was indeed the King of Kings. All others would fade away into the pages of history like Ozymandias.

In the hymn “**Joy to the World**” it shares “Let earth receive her king.” However, Herod – and even the Chief Priests and teachers of the law – did not receive the ‘King.’ We know the Magi did – because they fell down on their knees and worshiped him.

While the Magi approached the birth of Jesus with reverent awe – Herod was filled with fear and dread.⁴ We often speak of the gifts of the Magi as if that is the emphasis. In reality – the emphasis is not on the fact they brought gifts – but on the fact that they came and brought themselves. They came not to present gifts – but to worship the newborn King. They gave themselves to Christ.”⁵ We know they did

because they traveled – not back to Herod – but to the mission field. Their worship shaped all their further work.

THIRDLY, WE SEE THE POWER OF WORSHIP TO SHAPE OUR LIVES.

Yes, worship integrates both our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with one another into one reality. The wall between the private and the public is broken down in worship. The verb “to worship” occurs three times in our lesson today.⁶

Dr. Charles F. Stanley shares that, “Herod believed enough in the scriptures to inquire where they said the Messiah would be born – but not enough to shape his life according to its teachings. A little religion can be a dangerous thing.”⁷

I love the story about a certain husband who was having difficulty with the tension in his marriage. He decided one day to get a divorce. He sought out a lawyer who was a member of his Sunday School class to get some professional advice.

After sharing with the lawyer his entire story the man asked, “What is the best thing I can do?” **The attorney replied “Get down on your knees** and ask God for forgiveness of your selfish attitude. Then Go and apologize to your wife and children for being a complete idiot. Work harder and more lovingly to be the man God wants you to be.” After a long, deadly silence, the man replied, **“What is the next best thing I can do?”** Far too often we are just like him. Herod was! We say we want God’s best for our lives – however our actions and attitudes reveal a different desire.

Herod and the Scribes in Jerusalem knew all the texts and took no action. They would not travel 5 miles to discover what was taking place. The Magi traveled over a 1,000 miles – and had little or no access to the prophecies. Yet, they knew enough to fall down and worship the newborn King. How many years have you attended Sunday School and church services, owned three or four Bibles – but are hesitant to accept God’s best will for your life? What response is God waiting for from you this sacred season? If worship has the power to shape your life – what shape are you in today? Like the Magi and Paul – will you ‘arise and shine’.

LASTLY, THE BIRTH OF CHRIST CAUSES UPHEAVEL HERE ON EARTH.”

Matthew’s gospel clearly teaches us that the good news has its enemies.⁸ The cross reveals that to us as well. It was from Dr. Fred B. Craddock I learned “One has but to love to arouse hatred. One has but to speak the truth to arouse the network of lies and deception.

It is no mystery why the ONE who gave himself to loving the poor and neglected of the earth would be killed. There are institutions and persons who have other plans for the poor and neglected.”⁹

Yes, “whenever and wherever the message of Christ is taken into the world – there is the possibility that it will meet with rejection.” Truth does not come easy to us. Like Herod – the gospel challenges our personal kingdoms and convictions. As Eugene Peterson reminds us, “Many things are done in the name of Jesus – but not in the way of Jesus.”¹⁰ It is like the story of a dear saint who becomes so obsessed with her clean windows that she forgets the purpose of the window – which is to see the majestic world that God created. As different as they were – Herod and Jesus wanted the same thing – the world.¹¹ The one was willing to kill anyone and anything in his path for it. The other would be willing to sacrifice his life for the world he came to save. One way leads to death and darkness – the other way to love and eternal life. For which are you willing to live and die for? Which name and way will define your life – your soul – your all?

Are you willing – like the Magi and Paul and countless others – to arise and shine and seek the greater and more excellent way? Your light has come. Will you follow?

This brings us nicely to the Lord’s Table today. Here we see God’s best will for our lives. Here the light shines brightly. Here our lives can be shaped by Christ. Here we are given courage to go in a different direction. Come, it’s time to rise and shine – and live out the Good News for others to see his light.

May God give you wisdom and courage so to do.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
January 3, 2010 – preached at both services
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ENDNOTES

¹ John Piper, **“We Have Come to Worship Him.”** Dec. 21, 1997, Bethlehem Baptist Church, accessed 12/17/2009, www.soundofgrace.com.

² Thanks to Steve Zeisler for some of this background material. www.pbc.org/ accessed 12-17-09.

³ Charles F. Stanley, **LIFE PRINCIPLES BIBLE, NKJV**, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2005, Life Principle No. 10.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1993, January 12th devotion.

⁵ John Killinger, **CHRISTMAS SPOKEN HERE**, Broadmen Press.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1487.

⁷ Op. cit., Charles F. Stanley, **LIFE PRINCIPLES BIBLE NKJV**, page 1112.

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, [et.al], **PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR, YEAR C**, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, first edition, 1992, page 72.

⁹ Craddock, *ibid*, page 72.

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson and Peter Santucci, **THE JESUS WAY STUDY GUIDE**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, page 47.

¹¹ *Ibid*, Eugene H. Peterson and Peter Santucci, page 45.