

January 6, 2026 – Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, & Matthew 2:1-12

Why was the arrival of the wise men so troubling? That's a prominent theme in our Epiphany Gospel reading, and it bears some consideration. Herod is troubled by their arrival. All of Jerusalem is troubled by their arrival. Why? What was it about them that made everybody so scared?

Well, I think it really comes down to the question that they ask: "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*" They don't ask where is he who will become the next king, like at the birth of a crown prince. They don't ask who has seized the throne, or maybe more importantly, who has been appointed by Rome.

No, they ask about a new king who is already reigning. A king who has been born. And therefore, a king with a birthright to the throne of David. A king whose authority doesn't come from conquest or political manipulation, but according to God's promise.

And it's this specific question that immediately throws Jerusalem into turmoil. Herod is troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Herod is troubled because Herod knows something about kingship. He knows how fragile it is. He knows how easily it can be lost. He knows how much blood must sometimes be spilled to keep it.

Because Herod had no birthright to the throne. He wasn't a son of David. In fact, he wasn't even a Jew by birth. His father was an Idumean, a descendant of Esau, while his mother was a Nabataean princess. He was placed on the throne by Rome. Propped up by imperial power. Sustained by fear, suspicion, and violence. Herod is a worldly king made by worldly means and he rules in a worldly way.

And now these Magi arrive seeking a Jewish king not crowned by Rome but announced by a heavenly star, chosen by God himself. A king not ruling from Jerusalem's palace but lying in Bethlehem, the city of David. A king whose birth exposes just how fraudulent Herod's throne really is. They come seeking the Christ.

Herod does his best to pretend piety. He consults the chief priests and the scribes. He speaks the right religious language. He asks where the Christ is to be born. But his heart doesn't seek Christ. His heart seeks survival. He wants to eliminate a rival. He wants to secure his throne. He wants to make himself, functionally, an anti-Christ. The only king of the Jews that anyone will bow down to.

It's a rather startling contrast, isn't it? On the one hand, Jesus, the true King of the Jews, born quietly, humbly, according to God's promise. On the other hand, Herod, who grasps for messianic authority through deceit, fear, and bloodshed. One king draws the nations by his light. The other plunges his kingdom into darkness.

And yet, Herod isn't merely a villain from history. He's also a pretty good mirror of what sinful humanity always does when confronted with the true Christ. When the real King appears, our old Adam does not rejoice. It feels threatened. When Christ claims lordship, the sinful heart hears only that it has competition for the throne.

Herod tries to make himself the Christ by worldly means. He believes salvation comes through power and the elimination of threats. He trusts in swords, soldiers, and secrets. And this same temptation runs through every age. We're drawn to visible strength. We're comforted by institutions, influence, and control. We prefer a king we can manage, a god who serves our agendas, a righteousness for which we can take credit. But this is all darkness.

The true light doesn't originate from Jerusalem's palace. It doesn't shine from Herod's throne. "*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*" The true light rises from the Lord Himself. And where the Lord is, there is light. Even if He's found in a small town, in a humble house, in the arms of a poor mother.

Isaiah speaks of nations coming to this light, kings drawn to the brightness of its rising. Gold and frankincense appear in his prophecy long before they appear in Matthew's Gospel. The point is not exotic gifts or picturesque scenes. The point is revelation. God is revealing what was hidden. The light is for Israel, yes, but not just for Israel. The light is for the nations too.

And this is where St. Paul takes us in Ephesians. He reveals to us a great mystery, one hidden for ages, but now revealed: the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Jesus is born King of the Jews. He has the birthright of the king. He is owed an inheritance. The inheritance of his father David. The inheritance of his heavenly Father. And yet in Him, it is Gentiles who inherit everything. Not as second-class citizens. Not as tolerated outsiders. But as fellow heirs. Co-heirs. Full recipients of God's riches in Christ.

And that's something Herod could never understand. Herod used religion to secure power. God uses power to give away salvation. Herod's reign is built on exclusion: he will tolerate no rivals. Christ's reign is built on incorporation: we are fellow heirs, members of the same body. Herod kills to protect his status. Christ dies to give you His. Herod clings to a throne that will crumble. Christ lays down His life and receives a kingdom that will never end.

What Paul teaches in Ephesians, Matthew shows us in flesh and blood. The mystery revealed to the apostle is already taking place at Christ's birth. Gentiles are being drawn into Israel's promises. And notice how the Gentiles behave in Matthew's Gospel.

The Magi don't act like Herod. They don't seize power. They don't bargain. They don't negotiate. They kneel. They worship. They open their treasures, not to buy favor, but to confess their faith. Gold for a king. Frankincense for God. Myrrh for one who will die.

They probably don't understand everything yet. But they see enough. They see the light. And that's what faith does. Faith doesn't necessarily comprehend the whole mystery, but it clings to Christ nonetheless.

And that is where you come in to this story. Because you are not Herod. But you're not an Israelite by birth either. You're here because the mystery has been revealed to you. You're here because the light reached beyond Bethlehem, beyond Jerusalem, beyond Judea, beyond Judaism itself, and found you.

You are a Gentile heir, just like those Magi. Which means the riches of Christ belong to you. His righteousness. His forgiveness. His sonship. His resurrection. Not because you claimed them, but because He gave them. Not because you ascended to God, but because the Word became flesh. Because God revealed His Son to you.

Herod tried to use religion to protect his life and secure his throne. Faith does the opposite. Faith doesn't attempt to control Christ or put Him to work for our own security. Faith bows before Him as King and receives what He gives. Where Herod grasped and killed to preserve himself, faith kneels and lives by the gifts of God.

And the gifts Christ gives are clear. He gives His Word, which proclaims the mystery now revealed: forgiveness, life, and salvation for sinners. He gives the washing of rebirth, where Gentiles like us are made heirs of the kingdom. He gives His own Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins. This is how the true King reigns. Not by fear or force, but by giving Himself to His people.

Isaiah says, "*Arise, shine, for your light has come.*" That light isn't confined to the past. It shines now. It shines wherever the Word of Christ is preached. It shines from the font, where water is joined to God's promises and sinners are reborn as children of God. It shines from the altar, where the King who once lay in a manger now places His true Body and Blood into the mouths of His people.

This service of Word and Sacrament is our Epiphany. Christ revealing Himself, not to terrify kings or impress the powerful, but to give Himself to those who have nothing to offer. The mystery has been revealed. The King has come. And His riches are yours. Not seized by force, not earned by merit, but received by faith. Arise, then, and shine, not with your own light, but with His, for the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Amen.