



Sermon Notes

US N°. 87

Date: January 6th, 2012

Title: Epiphany

1. God's sovereign rule within human history during the 400 years of silence. James 4:13-15, "Come now, you who say, *"Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."*
- a. Persia
- b. Greece; Alexander's Empire and Koine Greek
- c. Septuagint
- d. Rome; Pax Romana, roads, rule, citizenship
- e. Caesar Augustus' tax as a sign of tyranny to the Jews.
2. God's sovereign rule within the stellar history
 - a. Herod died in 1BC, not 4BC; Josephus' earlier manuscripts show 1BC which got later changed through a transcription error to 4BC. This plays an important role in determining Jesus' year of birth.
 - b. In September of 3 B.C., Jupiter came into conjunction with Regulus, the star of kingship, the brightest star in the constellation Leo the Lion. Leo was the constellation of kings, and it was associated with the Lion of Judah. Just a month earlier, Jupiter and Venus had almost seemed to touch each other in another close conjunction, also in Leo. Then the conjunction between Jupiter and Regulus was repeated in February and May of 2 B.C. Finally, on June 17, 2 B.C., Jupiter and Venus, the two brightest objects in the night sky except for the moon, came so close that their disks appeared to touch. There has not been a brighter, closer conjunction of Venus and Jupiter in Leo so near to Regulus in the 2,000 years before or since. This exceptionally rare event could not have been missed by observers such as the Wise Men. In countries to the east of what was then the kingdom of Judea, observers could have seen the fused planets as a beacon in the direction of Jerusalem. Astrologers associated Jupiter with the birth of kings and Venus with fertility. The Bible does not mention how many Wise Men there were or where they came from. (The tradition of three Wise Men developed from the Bible's description of three gifts -- gold, frankincense and myrrh.) It is reasonable to suppose that their journey took months, however, since they had to cross several hundred miles of desert to reach Jerusalem. If they were in Jerusalem before dawn on Dec. 25, 2 B.C., they would in fact have seen Jupiter almost directly over Bethlehem to the south. They could have traveled the five miles to Bethlehem and presented their gifts that day. By then Jesus would have been a child living with his parents in a house, not a baby in a manger. There is a reference not to an infant (brephos in the Greek) but to a toddler (paidion), indicating that the birth itself had been some months before. This would mean Jesus was born in the spring or summer, which makes a better setting for Luke's account of the shepherds. In December in Judea it was too cold for sheep to graze in the open fields, and they were kept under shelter during the winter months, especially at night.
 - c. Job 9:9, "He made the Bear, Orion, and the Pleiades, and the chambers of the south;"

- d. Is. 40:26, *"Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things, who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power; not one is missing."*

3. The Magi

- a. Is. 60:3-6, *"The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. "Lift up your eyes all around, and see: They all gather together, they come to you; Your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be nursed at your side. Then you shall see and become radiant, and your heart shall swell with joy; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you. The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD."*
- b. Ps. 72:9-11, *"Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, and His enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him."*
- c. The Magi became the supreme priestly caste of the Persian Empire and continued to be prominent during the subsequent Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods and it was in this dual capacity, whereby civil and political counsel was invested with religious authority. During the time of Darius, one of the titles given to Daniel was *Rab-mag*, the Chief of the Magi. His unusual career included being a principal administrator in two world empires – the Babylonian and the subsequent Persian Empire. When Darius appointed him, a Jew, over the previously hereditary Median priesthood, the resulting repercussions led to the plots involving the ordeal of the lion's den. Many of the most messianic prophecies were given during the time of Daniel, and many presume that these would have been taught to the Magi. In fact, Suetonius in the Life of Vespasian writes, *"There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world."* From the days of Daniel, the fortunes of both the Persian and the Jewish nation had been closely intertwined. Both nations had, in their turn, fallen under Seleucid domination in the wake of Alexander's conquests. Subsequently, both had regained their independence: the Jews under Maccabean leadership and the Persians as the dominating ruling group within the Parthian Empire. It was at this time that the Magi, in their dual priestly and governmental office, composed the upper house of the *"Council of the Megistanes"* (from which we get the term "magistrates") which was comparable to the British Parliament with the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The upper house members were the Magi or "great ones" who were a supreme priestly class in Persia at the time and whose duties included the absolute choice and election of the king of the realm. In 63BC, magi made a presentation to the Roman Senate, they described the celestial portents that were being observed in Rome as indicating that a new ruler had been born. According to Julius Marathus, a few months before Augustus Cæsar (*the first roman Emperor*) was born the Senate took warning from the celestial event that nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people. Thereupon the Senate in consternation decreed that no male child born that year should be reared, but those whose wives were with child saw to it that the decree was not filed in the treasury, since each one appropriated the prediction to his own family. The Senate responded by ordering the death of baby boys in the candidate age range. Sound familiar? It turns out that when Herod ordered the slaughter of children in Bethlehem he may have been following a sort of Roman precedent. That precedent may be one reason Jerusalem was troubled at the news the Wise Men brought. Perhaps they realized the Romans might shed blood in response. It was, therefore, a group of Persian/Parthian "king makers" who

entered Jerusalem in the latter days of the reign of Herod. Herod's reaction was understandably one of fear when one considers the background of Roman-Parthian rivalry that prevailed during his lifetime and the history of Augustus' birth. The Magi that traveled to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem would have traveled 500-1000 miles and is rightly celebrated as an Epiphany of our Lord. In other words, the main significance of this account is that God wonderfully revealed the identity of Jesus as Messiah and King of the Jews to these Gentile Magi. It seems to be a wonderful fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy, that Jesus would be "a light of revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:31).

4. The Magi's gifts, Mt. 2:11, *"And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."*
 - a. Gold – symbolized royalty
 - i. Prov. 17:3, *"The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, But the LORD tests the hearts."*
 - b. Frankincense – used in Temple worship of burnt offerings.
 - i. A week before the harvest begins; strategic slashes are made in the outer bark which allow the liquid resin to ooze out. Another harvesting method used is to simply scrape away portions of the bark without making deep incisions and allowing the resin to flow from this wound. When the resin hits the oxygen, it starts to crystallize and harden. These hardened resins are called tears. The longer it is left on the tree, the harder it gets.
 - c. Myrrh – to embalm the dead, also used as a narcotic to dull pain (*cf.* Mark 15:23, Jn. 19:38-40)
 - i. Tapping is the method to extract resins which is done twice a year. To extract resins, an incision is made in the trunk of the tree, which pierces gum resin reservoirs located in it. The incisions are made all the way up from the root to those of the branches that are strong enough to bear it. The sap slowly oozes from the incisions and drips down the bark, forming tear-shaped droplets that are left to harden on the side of the tree. These droplets flow as pale yellow liquid, but harden to reddish-brown masses of many sizes, the average being that of a walnut.
 - d. Is. 53:2-5, *"For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed."*
 - e. Meeting Jesus changes the course of our lives. Mt. 2:11, *"...being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way."*
 - i. Acts 5:29, *"We ought to obey God rather than men."*
 - ii. 1 Cor. 3:19, *"For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."*
5. Our response... what gifts can we bring in response to God?
 - a. Is. 49:16, *"See, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands;"*
 - b. Jesus anointed at Bethany; Mark 14:3-10, *"And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her?"*

She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them."

- c. Eph. 5:2, "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."
 - d. Phil. 4:18, "Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God."
 - e. Ps. 141:2, "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."
 - f. Rom. 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."
 - g. Mt. 25:20-21, "*So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.'* His lord said to him, '*Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.*'" How well have we given ourselves to God in response to his wonderful gift to us? How readily and regularly have we spent time with God in worship, in prayer, in reading his Word? How readily and regularly have we given of ourselves and our time to someone who needs love and compassion? How readily have we shown that this king rules in our lives by letting him make a difference when we are confused or lonely or devastated by what life throws up? How well have we used our gifts to do our work honestly and well? How readily have we given God, not second best, not what's simply 'good enough', but the best of what we have to offer? The wisemen went home by another road, we too can walk a different road this year, a road where we can make the king of kings the living, active centre of everything we are and do. The challenge in front of each of us is to make each breathing moment a gift worth giving to the King.
 - h. Rom. 5:3-5, "...but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."
 - i. Mt. 6:28-33, "*Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 'Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.'*"
 - j. The Magi had an epiphany that resulted in their worship of the Christ child (& not the Virgin Mary).
 - k. Mt. 25:40, "*Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.*"
6. Declaration of a weekly fast & prayer for our church and our community.
- a. Q