

January 5, 2025
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

The Epiphany of Our Lord (observed)

The visit of the magi – the wise men or the three kings – is a familiar part of what we think of when we picture the Christmas story. The image of these men in ornate robes kneeling before a little child is one that fills us with awe at who the Christ Child is. It gives us joy at how our Lord arranges things, having a richly-loaded caravan from the east parked, not at Herod's palace, but outside of a simple carpenter's house.

And, as we consider especially the circumstances around the visit, it gives us a wonderful sense of comfort. In the visit of the magi, we are given a great example of the truth of Romans 8:28, "that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

To see the full extent of how God guided everything for His people's good in this account, we need to rewind the clock a little bit – about 600 years or so. When we consider what's going on with God's people a little after 600 B.C., it doesn't seem to be a picture of comfort. Quite the opposite, in fact.

These are the final days of the Kingdom of Judah. Wicked king follows wicked king. The people have continued further and further into idolatry. The prophets, such as Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, have been by-and-large ignored.

And so finally, God fulfills His word of judgment on His rebellious people, sending the Babylonian armies who destroy Jerusalem in the year 586 B.C. It's a truly terrible scene. The city is aflame, the temple pillaged and demolished, the people either put to the sword or led away in chains. How could God bring good out of this?

I would highlight two notable "goods" that come out of this, though there are doubtless many more. The first is that the people of Judah are finally broken of their sin of outward idolatry. No longer with the people openly go after false gods and worship physical idols. The temple, when it's rebuilt, will never again have statues to Baal or Ashera or any other demonic entity, and in fact when the Greeks try to force this it will set off the Maccabean Revolt, with countless Jews dying rather than offer worship to Zeus or any other false god.

The Jews were by no means perfect after this, with new temptations and sins arising, but still, this grievous violation of the First Commandment was at last dealt with, though the punishment had been severe.

A second good, directly connected to the visit of the magi, is that the Jews going into exile brought the Scriptures with them. They had been expelled from the earthly promised land, but they brought the word of God that foretold a better, heavenly promised land. The earthly kings of David had failed in their duty to faithfully lead Israel, but now in Babylon would be heard the promise of the great Son of David, the one who would be born King of the Jews, whose throne would never fail.

Through the exile, the saving Gospel, the promise of the coming Messiah, was brought to the greatest Gentile power of the day and spread throughout its many lands and peoples. Descendants of those peoples would include the magi, who very likely knew to look for the King of the Jews because of the Scriptures, brought to their lands hundreds of years before by the exiles.

While it was a wonderful thing that the Gospel had been brought into Babylon, the exile would still be a time of great testing for the Jews. They were often mocked by their captors, taunted and tempted to think that the gods of the Babylonians must have been stronger than the Lord. We hear the laments of God's people in Psalm 137, where they wrote, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'"

In captivity, the people would face demands that they bow down to giant idols or be cast into furnaces, pray to kings or be eaten by lions, hide their identity or be killed. Many times in those seventy years, God's people surely wondered how He would bring good from it.

And yet in those trials, the Lord raised up great heroes of the faith, men and women whose example is still commended to us by Holy Scripture today. There were the three young men, whom we usually know by their Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who gave one of the greatest responses of faith in the face of persecution: "If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." They would trust in God, regardless of if He chose to grant earthly deliverance or not.

Or we have the example of faithful Daniel, who suffers when the king's advisors get the king to sign a prideful decree forbidding prayer to anyone but him. Daniel sees the decree... and goes on praying to God just as he had before, knowing full well the consequences of what would happen if – or when – he was caught.

Or we have the example of Esther. Chosen by a prideful and vain king to be his queen, Esther was faced with the decision of remaining silent about her Jewish identity and enjoying her new comfortable life, or speaking up (which could result in death) to try to save her people. But when her wise cousin Mordecai told her, "who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this," Esther bravely answered, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

Such courage in the face of great trial was not ignored by the Lord. He used His saints to bring about great change in those who witnessed it. Seeing the three young men unharmed by the fiery furnace and accompanied by a fourth who looked unmistakably divine, Nebuchadnezzar cried out, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." Nebuchadnezzar then follows this with an empire-wide decree that no one in all Babylon may speak against the Lord God, for as the king confesses, "there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way."

Or King Darius, hearing Daniel's voice alive and well in the lions' den, sent this decree throughout all the Empire of Persia: "I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for He is the living God, enduring forever; His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and His dominion shall be to the end."

When Esther bravely speaks to King Ahasuerus, not only does the king have the mastermind of the evil plot, Haman, hung on the gallows Haman had built, but he also issues an empire-wide decree exposing the truth and defending God's people. Through the courage of these faithful men and women, the name of God was exalted throughout the lands. The word of the Lord brought by the exiles would not just be a triviality, added to the countless other legends of the empire's peoples, but one exalted above all others by the kings and emperors themselves.

This prominence no doubt led to many, many people considering seriously these Scriptures of the Jews and the promised Messiah of which they spoke, and preserving them for future generations to hear as well. Those future generations would have then included the magi.

So by the time the magi even depart from the East, following this miraculous star, God has been at work for centuries before. He had been guiding history, from the course of mighty empires to the location of secret conversations, to bring about this event, and many others all tied to it. The Lord had been working all things for the good of His people, just as He promised. And that would continue with the visit of the magi. In their visit, we see God turning things that would appear to be odd or difficult or outright bad all for the good of those whom He has called.

For example, we might wonder why the Lord sent them were He did. They followed the miraculous star, which He provided, and where did it send them? Not to Bethlehem, at first! No, the magi end up in Jerusalem. This seems to be the logical place to look for the King of the Jews, as it was the capital city of the Jews.

But instead of the baby, they find Herod. He is king of the Jews, not by word of Scripture, but by the decree of the Romans. And he is insanely paranoid, murdering a wife and multiple children to stay on his throne. When the magi show up at his palace, we hear that, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." He's troubled because he's worried about his throne; all Jerusalem is troubled because they're worried that more people will start being murdered soon.

Why didn't the Lord just cause the star to bring the magi to Bethlehem? We hear later that it would in fact guide them not only to the right town but even the right house! Didn't this plan of the Lord cause a lot more trouble than necessary?

No, even here the Lord causes all things to work for the good of His people. The magi are serving as His instruments, even if they don't realize it. In sending them to Jerusalem, the Lord brings them to a fuller understanding of His word. Apparently they didn't have a full copy of the Old Testament, or didn't grasp it completely, so the Lord causes the priests and scribes to be gathered together to recite the prophecy He had given centuries before through the prophet Micah. In this, the

magi would see that there was still much to be learned through these Scriptures of the Jews, and so they should spend all the more time in them.

The Lord also sends these men to Jerusalem for the sake of Herod. Again, Herod was a wicked, wicked ruler. But God is here calling on him to repent. He is reminding Herod that the true King of the Jews has already been foretold, that Herod should seek to serve this King and thereby be blessed. It is sad to see Herod harden himself against God's word, as he believes the truth about the location of Bethlehem but then rejects the Kingship of the One born there. Nevertheless, God's call to Herod was sincere, and had he heeded it, he would have been saved.

Furthermore, the call to look to God and His word goes to all Jerusalem, as the troubling arrival of these visitors would have directed many to look to God's word and see what was going on. Though Herod's purposes for dispatching the magi to Bethlehem are evil, they would have pointed the way for others to follow. Others would be led to look to Bethlehem, to see that God was now fulfilling the promise He had made hundreds of years before. That which the people had hoped for for so long was now at hand.

And if there was any doubt, the actions of the magi would've put them to rest. "And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." Here the Gentiles come to worship the King of the Jews – just as the prophets had foretold. Here nations come to the light, kings to the brightness of God's rising – as Isaiah had spoken. Here gifts will be given that will mark this Child as King and God and Sacrifice.

Do the magi know they are fulfilling all this, that their actions will show the world just who this little boy is? Almost certainly not. And yet here God is causing His word to be fulfilled, that His people might have comfort and hope.

That comfort and hope are still ours today. We can look at how God has guided all things for His people in the past and know that He is still doing it in the present, and will continue into the future.

We can see how God's word has never failed, even when it seemed to be utterly ridiculous in the face of worldly circumstances.

We can trust that we are in the Lord's hands, whether we are facing great trials like the faithful saints of old, or whether we aren't certain of how God is using us like those magi, or whether we are troubled like Jerusalem upon their arrival. As the Lord guided the magi by the star, He leads us by His word, and wherever that brings us, we know it's for our good.

In the name of Jesus, amen.