

Epiphany Festival – January 1, 2012
Hymns: 80 - 83 - 79 - 91 v1,2,5

*Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid.
Star of the East, the horizon adorning, guide where our infant Redeemer is laid. Amen!*

CW 92, v1

MATTHEW 2:1-12 WHY SEEK THE CHRIST CHILD?

Dear worshipers in the new year -

Have you ever seen a UFO? Don't laugh. Former president Ronald Reagan said he did. During a routine flight while he was governor of California, Reagan reported seeing a bright white light zigzagging through the sky. After having his plane give chase for a few minutes, Reagan told the *Wall Street Journal* that "all of a sudden to our utter amazement it went straight up into the heavens."

Former President Jimmy Carter had a similar experience in 1969, 7 years before he was elected president. "It was the darndest thing I've ever seen," Carter said during the 1976 campaign. "It was big; it was very bright. It changed colors and it was about the size of the moon. We watched it for 10 minutes, but none of us could figure out what it was. One thing's for sure. I'll never make fun of people who say they've seen unidentified objects in the sky."

Welcome to this celebration of Epiphany! Epiphany celebrates an event in which a group of magi saw something bright and mysterious in the heavens--not a UFO, but a star, a very bright star. They followed it until it came to rest over the house where Mary and Joseph were staying along with their infant Son. Once inside, they fell down and worshiped Jesus and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. "We have seen His star in the east," they explained. These magi are celebrated as the first gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as the King of kings.

The gospel of Matthew tells their story. Little is known about who these men really were, where they came from, or even how many of them there were. Early scholars inferred that there were three of them because three different gifts were named, but we do not know for sure. Neither do we know the nation from which they came. Some scholars argue that the group probably came from Babylon, since Babylon is directly east of Jerusalem and the Babylonians were astute astronomers with records dating back to 2000 BC. Indeed, since the Jews were once captives in Babylon, it makes sense that the wise men would have known of the expected King and the Old Testament prophecies surrounding His arrival. They could even have been descendants of Jews who married Babylonians, leaving a little Jewish blood in these mostly Gentile visitors to Bethlehem – the first gentiles to acknowledge Christ!

What was the nature of the light that guided them? It is called a "star," but, if so, it was an unusual one. It was exceedingly bright and it seemed to move before them. Men have devised theories. One is that the star may have been a nova or an extremely rare supernova--a white dwarf star that has blown off its upper layers in a violent explosion, making it as much as fifty thousand times brighter than our sun and viewable as a bright star in the night sky, lasting perhaps for several months to more than a year. Another favorite theory is that it was Halley's Comet. This would explain its movement in the sky – but hardly its coming and stopping over the house where Jesus was!

Nativity sets always include the three magi as if they were present in the stable at Jesus' birth. However, it is plain that these men did not arrive until some time later - possibly going on two years after Christ's birth, certainly some time after his presentation in the Temple many days after His birth (Luke 2:22- 39), which we had as our sermon text last night. Immediately after their visit, you'll remember, Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus to Egypt, where they stayed till after Herod's death in 4 B.C. This means Jesus would have been born in early 4 B.C. and perhaps a few years before that! We could go on, of course, with much historical speculation about these men who occupy such an

interesting place in our faith. It's all part of the wonder of the birth of our Lord.

What does this ancient story say to us? There are three elements that stand out. **First, we see the genuine searching of these men from the east.** The magi traveled many miles without maps, or GPS systems . . . trusting only in some ancient and somewhat obscure biblical writings that their search would yield this King Whom they sought. Surely friends and family back home tried to dissuade them. Surely they became discouraged as they trod mile after fruitless mile. Obviously they had a great yearning to bow down before One Who was far greater than themselves.

You and I have that yearning. It is the earnest searching of the heart of every man and woman for God. *Everyone wants a "god!"* A little boy lay on his small bed, having just retired for the night. Lying down to sleep, he lies on his side facing in the direction of the large bed on which his father lay, and asks: "Father, are you there?" "Yes, my son," was the answer. "Father!" asks the little boy. "Are you facing toward me?" "Yes," responds the dad. "Good!" says the son...and he falls off to sleep, without a thought of harm.

Tonight the little boy is an old man of seventy, and every night before going to sleep, he looks up into the face of his Heavenly Father and says, "Father, are You there?" And, "Is Your face turned toward me?" And the answer comes back, clear and strong: "Yes, my son."

You don't have to be a pagan from a far off land to seek a god. Everyone wants a "god" to bless him or her. It's just that, too often, they don't want a god who crimps their style and life. It's kind of like the person who would sing, "Take my life, but let me be." Who is your "god?" Is He merely a convenient, smiling source of good in life? Or is He Lord of your life? The wise men are sometimes spoken of as being kings themselves. Yet they come – at great expense and inconvenience – to bow down lowly before and worship the King of their lives.

I don't know about you. Every time I come into this room, there is part of me that is still seeking God. I continually need to be reminded that I am not dependent on my own resources. There is One far greater than I Who is in control of this universe. We see in this simple story the genuine, godly searching of these men from the east.

We also see the cruel, self-seeking attitude of Herod. We can almost see the sneer on his face as he says deceitfully, *"Go and search carefully for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him."* Herod was a cruel man. Secular historians tell us that as well as the Bible narrative. But he is not alone. The world has always been inhabited by cruel men and women – sinners. So often, the innocent have suffered at their hands. Herod's motive was clear. He was so intent on eliminating threats to his kingship that he was willing to kill innocent infants to ensure his continued rule. In America, countless women (along with their men) kill their own unborn who would threaten what they want in life. What or who have you been willing to take down or out for your own personal gain? How many times in your life? This past year? This past week?

You see, everyone needs a Savior. Herod needed a Savior. The Wisemen needed a Savior. You and I do too! Jesus came to destroy the power of sin. In search of such forgiveness, the wisemen were willing to go to great lengths – many, many miles of length in search of the Savior. May you and I in Jesus seek and find a Savior! And in the New Year may we be willing to go to great lengths to find Him more and serve Him better!

And, finally, we see the adoration of the magi for the Child as they give Him their gifts. It's a beautiful scene, and no wonder we include the wise men in our nativity scenes. The magi offer Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There is spiritual significance to their gifts. Gold was a worthy gift for a king. Frankincense is a gift offered up as a fragrant sacrifice to gods. Myrrh was a common embalming substance in ancient times.

Of course, Jesus is a king – One worthy of far more than all the gold of earth. He can merely command – and create a mountain of gold! The visitors were wisemen indeed to see the creator and ruler of heaven and earth veiled in human flesh and lying in a manger! Jesus set aside the use of His power over all to be born a helpless newborn among His creatures. Since His resurrection and ascension, Jesus rules over all again at the right hand of the Father.

Frankincense then was surely a fitting gift for God veiled in human flesh. The Second Person of the Trinity was worthy to receive such burnt offering sacrifices of men. Were the wisemen wise enough to comprehend that Jesus would be the sacrifice to end all sacrifices for sin?!

The third gift – myrrh – used in burial practices - suits this infant every bit as much as the other two! Jesus – God as well as man, ruler of the universe – would die for the sins of men. Jesus gave His life into death for us and all people on Calvary's cross! He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

Were these men really that wise? Or was it divine providence that directed their gifts to be what they were? More importantly, thank God that you have been made wise unto salvation! Thank God that you can identify that Baby in the manger as King, God, and worthy Sacrifice for your sins!

How far will you go out of your way to worship Him, as you are doing here this day while others have no time this New Year's morning for the Lord Jesus? What gifts will you bring the Baby Jesus? Our gifts of time, talents, and treasure express Jesus' "worship" to each of us as individuals. The proclamation our gifts support witness before all the world that this Baby is indeed a King (in fact, King of kings!). The Scriptures we profess identify the Baby in the manger as God Himself come down to earth, taking on human flesh that He might be a living sacrifice for sin. The Gospel we support with our gifts proclaim Jesus given up unto death for you, for me, for all. May we wisely serve Him all our days! Amen!

*Shall we not yield Him the finest of offerings, rarest of fragrances, tribute divine?
Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean, Myrrh from the forest and gold from the mine?
Amen!*

CW 92, v3