



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**The Epiphany of Our Lord**

**January 6, 2019**

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### **“Herod and the Chief Priests”**

*(Matthew 2:1-5)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet . . .’” (Mt. 2:1-5).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles, lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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The chief priests told Herod where the Christ, the Messiah was supposed to be born. They even pointed to the passage from the prophet Micah which says he would be born in Bethlehem. So the chief priests remembered the prophecy! Good for them! Yet it has always struck me that they didn't go down to Bethlehem to check it out for themselves. Why not?

They knew the prophet said he would be born there. They knew some magi were poking around because God had clued them into his birth. They knew Herod was troubled by it. Maybe they even knew some shepherds had checked it out and were spreading the news, and "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." The point is people are starting to respond to the birth, but there's no record of any response from the chief priests. Bethlehem is just six miles away. If it was important to them, they would have gone. But apparently it wasn't important. Apparently, they have no opinion about it nor any interest.

I suppose that indifference is its own response, and it is perilous. The opposite of faith is not heresy, after all. It's indifference. The heretic still cares about what he believes; he's just got it wrong. The one who's indifferent doesn't care. It's all the same to him.

Similarly the opposite of love is not hatred. If you hate someone, in a sense, you still care. The opposite of love, again, turns out to be indifference.

So the chief priests didn't bother to check it out for themselves. If you think about it, the same is happening today. Many people have heard of Jesus. They know he is purported to be the Savior. But they are insidiously indifferent to the news. It doesn't make them happy or angry

or sad. He doesn't cause a ripple in their lives. That strikes me as odd because there's a lot on the line. In Mark 16 Jesus says, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned." Most people know that's the claim and those are the stakes, and still, they don't look into it. They don't check it out. Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

Now, over the centuries, plenty of people have claimed to be god. There's a long string of Roman emperors who claimed that. And, as a student in Madison, I once met a guy who was exceedingly high on himself and maybe something else too. But Jesus is different. Big claims were made about him even before he was born. And then there was excitement surrounding his birth. Later, as a man, people saw Jesus doing miracles, and not the kind that could easily be dismissed because it was some kind of psychosomatic muscle pain. No, they saw him stretch out a man's withered hand. They saw him walk on water. They saw him calm storms. In addition, those closest to him, those who knew him best, in other words, those most likely to have a clear eyed, levelheaded view of him (his own brothers, for example) became convinced he was God.

And for his part, Jesus always accepted the worship of others. Do you remember the blind man whom Jesus healed with a little mud? The man responded by worshipping Jesus and Jesus received that worship, allowed it, didn't try to dissuade him from it. Or Peter, when he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Or Thomas, when he cried out, "My Lord and my God". Jesus never said, "No, no. Don't go there. Don't worship me. Worship only God." No, Jesus always calmly received the worship of others. So today, a little over 2 billion people worship him.

No thoughtful but skeptical person can just walk away from all that, but must look into it for himself. It makes me think of last week's Gospel lesson, when Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms and said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel." That is he will forever bring a crisis point into every single human life. They must answer for themselves: "Who is

Jesus?”

In his book, “Basic Christianity” John Stott says there are just three possible responses to the claims of Jesus. 1.) You either hate him and wish him dead. 2.) Or you think he’s some sort of lunatic. 3.) Or you fall down and worship him and let him change your life.

If Jesus had been a crackpot, that would be one thing. Others have claimed to be god, but I don’t think it’s necessary for everyone to study the life of David Koresh, for instance. They don’t have the evidence or the impact to back up their claims. But there is one, and look at the impact of his life. I would argue no one has ever had a greater impact on the world than Jesus. Look at the ethics he inspired, and the music and the artwork. Look at what he said. Study the parables and how much they teach, and with so few words!

He is a combination of virtues we’ve never before seen: tenderness without weakness, strength without arrogance, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, power without insensitivity, the harshest judgment for the self-righteous, yet the most gentle kindness for broken sinners, holiness and unbending convictions but still approachable. He was never inconsistent. He never made a false step. You can’t just be indifferent to that!

Remember what Jesus told the church in Laodicea? “You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! But because you are lukewarm . . . I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3). Cold indifference puts one on the wrong end of the equation.

I think some people don’t want to look into it because they’re afraid it just might be true. Let me explain: If you come to believe Jesus Christ is Lord, then you have to change the way they you live tomorrow. If it’s true, you’ve just lost control of your life. If it’s true that Jesus is Lord you are suddenly accountable to him above anyone else. If it’s true, you can no longer live the way you feel like living. You have to find out what he says and try to follow him. Who on earth could even be objective with all that on the line?

Imagine a judge who's scheduled to hear a case about a huge pharmaceutical company charged with fraud. What if that judge happened also to be a major investor in that company and would stand to lose a large sum of money if that company was found to be fraudulent? We would say he has a conflict of interest and isn't fit to hear the case. He cannot be trusted to be unbiased and objective. Realize you and I have an even greater conflict of interest. We stand to lose more than money. If Jesus is Lord, that means you just lost control of your life.

In Revelation, Jesus says, "I stand at the door and knock". One author says you might not want to let him in. If you do he may tell you there are some things about you that you need to change, things that you don't want to change. He might rearrange the furniture and throw some things out that you very much want to keep.

Jesus was very clear that all should consider the costs before following him. He said it's like a king sitting down before going to war and asking, does he have enough men. Then he said, "Anyone who will not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14: 25ff). Who wants to carry a cross? No wonder many choose indifference. In the short term, it's safer.

The great 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Paschel would have us ask, "What's the worst case scenario here?" If the claims of Jesus are just a big lie and yet you believe, what's the worst that can happen? You live a lifetime of unnecessary piety, you suffer through a bunch of unnecessary sermons, and you live with a false sense of hope. On the other hand if it's true and you refuse to believe it that means your life will eventually end and then your worst nightmare will come true because you've rejected the only one who could save you. The wisest course of action is the one with the most acceptable worst case scenario.

Finally, if it's all true, if Jesus is who he says he is, it is the best case scenario. Why? Because he says morality and goodness are not the answer. They're not going to get you into heaven. But **He** will, by grace. So even though

you've not been a good person all your life, God loves you anyway and went to the cross to die for you and save you. Even our indifference cannot undo that, for when we are faithless he remains faithful. It's not God's way to return indifference with indifference. It's not even God's way to return hatred with hatred. No, he loves those who hate him and loves also those who are indifferent and will not give up on them.

I'm thinking now of those **we** love who grew up in the Christian faith but now seem mostly indifferent. They don't go to church; they don't want to talk about the faith. The Gospel is of no comfort to them even when they're down. In Luke 15 Jesus said, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not go out and search for that one *until* he finds it?" I love that word "until." It means our Shepherd will not quit the search. He will not stop. He will not give up the search. Our Good Shepherd is anything but indifferent for he laid down his life for the sheep. Though some may never get around to looking into it for themselves, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, *will not stop* looking into it for them.

Though you and I don't want to lose control of our lives even for him, he was willing to lose control of his life, even for us. Though we may not want anything to do with carrying a cross and following him, he was willing to carry a cross and lead the way for us. In fact, Hebrews 12 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who for the joy set before him endured the cross." There's nothing joyful about a cross, unless it's in the heart of one who endures it out of fierce love for you.

The chief priests were indifferent to the news of Jesus' birth. They never bothered to check it out for themselves. Later, their cold indifference would turn into hot opposition, and they would see to it that he was crucified. But what they didn't know, what they couldn't have known is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem for them too. And he was up there on the cross for them, for those who hate him, and for those who love him.

And he's up there for the indifferent so that one day they may have life, and have it to the full. Amen.

