

The Epiphany of Our Lord, A ✕ D 2010

Matthew 2:1-12

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 The cathedrals of Europe are relics of a forgotten faith. Once a largely Christian continent, most of Europe is now populated by post-Christian people. Any Sunday morning, most of the cathedrals and beautiful churches—with their ornate architecture, designed to draw your eyes upward in worship, with mesmerizing stained glass that captures the beauty of the Gospel message, with their priceless pipe organs, their perfect acoustics, their seating for thousands—are empty. Those that still draw parishioners have only a small handful of people in them. What happened? How did the countries that produced some of the finest Christian theologians of the last five hundred years abandon the faith those theologians defended? How did the hotbed of the Reformation give up the Word of God on the very ground where gallons of blood were shed to defend the Scriptures? How did the churches that once rang with the first performances of Bach's Lutheran Chorales fall silent? What happened?

2 The story is older than Europe. The Christian Church grew up on the shores of the Mediterranean, fertile for the reception of the Gospel. Before Europe even knew of Christianity, cities like Alexandria in North African Egypt and Constantinople and Nicaea in what is now Turkey were the places that came to mind when you thought of the struggle for Christian orthodoxy. Then, with the invention of Islam in the 7th century, everything changed. Now, a map of world religions will show all of the Middle East, Turkey, and North Africa a monochromatic Muslim blue. What happened?

3 The story is older than Christianity. When, following the star, the Magi came to Herod to ask where to find the Newborn King of the Jews, Herod was troubled. So he assembled the chief priests and the scribes, and he asked them—not where the King of the Jews was born—but where the Christ was to be born. The chief priests and scribes knew. "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' Only once is Bethlehem prophesied by name as the birthplace of the Christ. And they knew it. They knew the Scriptures; they were experts in them. They knew the Scriptures, but they refused to listen to them.

4 Enlightened Europeans, who had the Word of God, refused to hear that Word. So it departed. Empty cathedrals show what happens when God withdraws His Word after it is rejected. North African Christians, who had heard and received the Word of God gave up that Word when enticed by Muhammad and his soldiers. And the Word of God departed. Early Christian churches that now serve as mosques are a grave warning to any who would so easily give up the Word of God. The people chosen to receive the promised Messiah had the Word of God but refused to hear it or believe it. And the Word of God departed, or, rather,

the Word of God arrived, bearing human flesh. But wicked Herod and his faithless chief priests who used the prophecies about the Messiah to seek to kill Him rather than to seek to worship Him are a testimony to how depraved humanity is when God withdraws His Word.

5 Do not suppose you are immune. Do not rely on living in a Christian country. As goes Europe, America shortly follows. Do not rely on being in a Christian family. Faith is not inherited. Do not even rely on being a Christian. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. To refuse to hear the Word of God is to despise it. And while God is patient and slow to anger, not wishing any to be lost, He does eventually withdraw His Word when it is continually despised and rejected. Not even the scribes and chief priests with the Scriptures memorized could receive faith while also refusing to hear the Word of God. Repent.

6 That Herod feigns interest, that he pretends to want to worship the Christ makes him no different from you. That they saw themselves so highly as to depart from the hearing of the Word of God, depart from the places where God delivers His gifts of forgiveness and eternal life makes the post-Christian Europeans no different from you. That your sinful flesh wants nothing more than to get you away from the Word of God that is truly violent to your sinful self makes you no different from every human being. Except one.

7 This Baby is like none other. He welcomes Gentile kings, who, having no blood-line to connect them to Abraham and David have no rightful claim to pay homage to the King of the Jews. He would welcome Herod's worship, and He welcomes your worship. This Baby in a manger is no ordinary child. He is worthy of the worship of kings and wise men and sinners. He is worthy of Herod's homage. And He is worthy of your devotion. He was born for Jews & Gentile kings, for Herod & his chief priests, for sinners of every kind, for you. Because your sinful nature hates the Word of God, because your ears are by nature sealed to the Word, because your heart is stubborn to receive the gift of faith, this Child is God who bears your flesh. His ears hear the Word of God, and His heart is receptive to His Father's will. He is everything you are not, which is exactly what you need: a Savior.

8 Whether intentionally or by accident, the Magi bring fitting gifts. Gold is a gift for royalty, and this King is not merely the King of the Jews but the King of Kings. Frankincense is a gift fit for God, who is pleased with the smell of incense, who is worshipped in the offering of incense. And myrrh is a fit gift to give someone about to die. It was myrrh mixed with wine offered as an intoxicant to Jesus as He hung dying on the cross. And it was seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes that Nicodemus brought to perfume the dead body of his Lord once it was placed in the tomb. This Baby Jesus is born to die, born to be the crucified King. Worshipping Him for His mercy is more than appropriate.

9 You cannot sustain your own faith any more than you can create it. That's the point of Epiphany. But you don't have to. The same way faith was delivered, through the hearing of the preached Word, through

Holy Baptism, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is the same way it's sustained. Don't worry about being among those who have stopped hearing the Word of God and so have ceased to be Christians. Worry about being where the Word of God is proclaimed. It's the Word, through which the Spirit creates faith. It's the Word that declared you a child of God in Holy Baptism. It's the Word that pronounces you forgiven in Holy Absolution. It's the Word not only that you hear but also that you eat in the Holy Supper. Here is the Word who took flesh giving His flesh to you for true food and His blood to you for true drink. Here your sins are forgiven. Here your faith sustained. Here, you hear the Word of God and are kept in that Word of God who became flesh to live and die and rise for you.

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