

Sermon 1-6-19  
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Based on the Gospel for The Epiphany of our Lord, Matthew 2:1-12

### **Electric Gospel**

Historically, the Church of Jesus Christ established the season of Christmas to be twelve days long – December 25<sup>th</sup>, the first day, to January 5<sup>th</sup>, the twelfth day. This is why there's a song called The Twelve Days of Christmas. For these twelve days Christians are to meditate on and rejoice in the great and glorious cosmic mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ – God with us as one of us.

My maternal grandparents were from Germany and continued some of their German traditions here in the U.S. My mother says that when she was a child, the family Christmas tree was not set up until Christmas Eve. In the afternoon, the children were made to take a nap. When they got up, there was the Christmas tree and the stockings filled with goodies. That's how it should be. Advent ends on December 24<sup>th</sup>. Only then does Christmas begin. In Advent the people of God look forward to the coming of the Messiah. During Christmas, we celebrate His arrival as the mortal Suffering Messiah.

On the other hand, our general culture now celebrates Christmas from the day after Thanksgiving until December 25<sup>th</sup>. This happened because of a new invention at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century called the Department Store. When Department Stores figured out they could turn Christmas into a gold mine, things changed. So, who's at the end of the now traditional Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade? Why, none other than Santa Claus! That parade was established to get people to start their Christmas gift shopping the next day – the so-called Black Friday because the shopping surge turns balance sheets from red to black.

The neighbors next to my brothers-in-law are examples of this trend in the general culture. They set up their Christmas decorations on the day after Thanksgiving. By 11pm on Christmas Day their tree is out at the curb and all the decorations are down. Indeed, try to find a Christmas song anywhere on radio at 12:01am on December 26<sup>th</sup>. This means that all the emotion of Christmas is used up by December 26<sup>th</sup>.

But as the church established the festival, the emotion is meant to begin on December 24<sup>th</sup> and carry through several minor festivals – St. Stephen's Day on December 26<sup>th</sup>, St. John the Evangelist on December 27<sup>th</sup>, Holy Innocents, Martyrs on December 28<sup>th</sup>, The Name of Jesus on January 1<sup>st</sup> – until the 13<sup>th</sup> day, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Epiphany of our Lord. As the church established it, the Christmas season doesn't end until the Epiphany, today, January 6<sup>th</sup>.

In European tradition, the Epiphany is known as little Christmas. The Italians referred to it as Three Kings. To what extent it's celebrated in Europe today, I don't know. But it was celebrated. The people I've known in the generations ahead of mine told me that.

But because of the general culture, the only time we do anything with January 6<sup>th</sup> now is if it falls on a Sunday, like this year. That's a pity. The Epiphany is a great festival in its own right.

At Christmas, Jesus comes into the world hidden. His birth is only made known to a few shepherds in the field. At the Epiphany, His birth is announced to the world. He is revealed to the world. That's what the Greek word, Epiphanos or Epiphany in English means – revelation. The birth of Jesus was revealed to the world through the visit of the Magi from the East – from present day Iraq.

We don't know how many of these Magi, these Wise Men, there were. Tradition makes it three because three gifts were given: gold, frankincense and myrrh. But, more than three men could have delivered the three gifts. The one thing we do know is that because these men were big shots, when they came to Jerusalem they sought out the big shots to find out where the King of the Jews had been born. They assumed the important people in Jerusalem would know because of the star. So, they stopped in to visit Herod the Great, puppet king of Judea under the Roman Empire.

Herod the Great was not a Jew by ancestry. His family was from Idumea, to the south of Israel. Therefore, he was exceedingly sensitive to any potential threat to his continued rule over Judea, especially any pureblood Jewish threat. In addition there had been constant plots to overthrow Herod during his reign. Some of these plots had come from his own family. In response he had had family members ruthlessly executed. So, Herod was very much the wrong guy to go to when the Magi showed up. But these important strangers had no idea. They were simply following the protocol of their rank.

We read in Matthew 2:1-3, "1... Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.' 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." Blissfully unaware of the political hornets nest they had walked into, the Magi, by their very presence in Jerusalem, revealed to the world that the King of the Jews had been born. This was an Epiphany, a revelation. It was news.

The Epiphany and the Sundays after Epiphany are all about revelation – news. The gospel lessons for the Epiphany season are about all the initial miracles Jesus performed to reveal Himself as Messiah.

The Magi may have been Jews from present day Iraq. But, because the Magi were from a foreign country they were blissfully unconcerned about politics in Judea. Therefore, they considered the star to be good news for Israel – an omen of blessing.

But do you remember Simeon's prophecy from last week's gospel? Luke 2:34-35, "34... Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed....'" Well, as soon as Herod heard of Jesus, the thoughts of his heart were revealed to Yahweh, and those thoughts were of murder.

There are several questions to be pondered here. The fundamental one is this. If Jesus is the good news of salvation, the good news of resurrection from the dead and life eternal, why would He ever be opposed? Why would He ever be spoken against?

When we ask this question, the great mystery of evil, sin and rebellion reveals itself for what it is.

Consider Satan for a moment. He has been judged and thrown out of heaven. He has lost all his goodness. By his very nature he can now only be in total rebellion against God. And rebellion against God is the root of all the evil in the universe. For his rebellion, Satan will be condemned for all eternity to the Lake of Fire proclaimed in the book of Revelation.

So why didn't such a horrible fate and horrible threat stop Satan from sinning initially? Somehow Satan became convinced in his own being that becoming totally evil (totally in rebellion against God) and a Lake of Fire would be worth the price to be his own god, to be his own creator, to be his own determiner of right and wrong, good and evil, and to have things his own way. Satan has the unquenchable desire to be his own master, even if it means being master of a horrid Lake of Fire. This is the great mystery of sin.

Satan infected Adam and Eve with his desire. As a consequence, being our own masters, being our own gods, and defining good and evil for ourselves is the burning desire we're all born with. We won't give up the slavery of having to be our own gods for anything. This is the sin sickness that consumes us at the center of our beings.

And the one thing we cannot see in any way, except by revelation from God, is the end scenario of our sin sickness. Rebellion against the righteousness of our Creator will get us exactly what rebellion wants – the Lake of Fire, where together with Satan and his minions we can be free to be our own masters of rebellion and evil forever. Nothing, not even the threat of the Lake of Fire, will stop the sinful nature from the raging lust to play God.

It's no surprise, then, that our rebellion would rage against the righteous Son of God who came to destroy it and free us from its consequences – sin, death and the power of the devil. Therefore, Simeon was more than correct when he prophesied that Jesus was to be a sign that is spoken against. Herod the Great was the first of many rebels to both speak against and take action against the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Jesus was saved only by the obedience of his guardian, Joseph, to the warning that the angel gave: "Flee to Egypt."

But ultimately when the time was right, Jesus did not save Himself from the rage of our terrible rebellion. Ignoring the public demonstrations Jesus had made that He is the Messiah, the rebellious Jewish leadership convicted Jesus of blasphemy (speaking evil of God or against God) and condemned Him to death. They got the Romans to do the dirty work of publicly executing Him on a cross.

And even as Jesus died, there was a rising and falling in Israel, a division among the onlookers. Many mocked. Others wept. One of the two thieves crucified with Jesus recognized who He is and begged for mercy. The other did not. Upon death, the Roman officer assigned to supervise the crucifixion spoke out in amazement – even declaring Jesus to be the Son of God. The Jewish leadership remained stonily unconvinced.

When Lord Holy Spirit revealed Jesus resurrected from the dead in an immortal body, He became even more controversial. Indeed, who can be resurrected from death in an immortal body? Were those who claimed to have seen Him alive lying?

Or are they telling the truth? Were those who wrote down the testimony lying? Or are they telling the truth? Even 2,000 years later we can figure this out. By honest and intelligent analysis it's clear they told us the truth about Jesus' resurrection. Yet, the rebellion absolutely does not want this truth to be possible. And history has proven that the rebellion is murderous.

And so in this sanctuary at this very moment we are in the midst of the historic controversy. The air here is actually electric with it. Not that there's going to be a thunderclap. But the spiritual War of Words is upon us. Who are we going to listen to? Is Jesus of Nazareth Messiah or not? Is he the cure for your rebellion and mine or not? Is He the Way, the Truth and the Life, or not? Does He deliver us from our rebellion against God or not? Will the grace of God win our hearts or will we walk away still entrenched in rebellion? This is the electrical tension in the air any time God's Word is read, preached or studied. Jesus is the sign that causes all the tension. He is the good news bitterly opposed by the sinful nature.

Understand, then, that in the new era we are entering as a mission congregation, Scripture guarantees that there will be opposition and controversy because of Jesus. Of course, we should not invite controversy by doing stupid or ungodly things. As Peter wrote to the first century Christians in 1 Peter 2:12, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Peter knew that even when Christians live good lives in the midst of unbelievers, the sign of Messiah Jesus nevertheless would be a cause of attack. Indeed, as a baby Jesus Himself had to endure Herod's fury just for being born. What, then, will make us exempt from the controversy surrounding the sign of Jesus?

Therefore, through the Word of God we need to be prepared emotionally and spiritually and readied intellectually for controversy. Jesus brings peace between you and God. He brings His peace into your inner being. But in the hearts around you there will not necessarily be peace on account of Jesus and your relationship with Him.

Nevertheless, if we will give ourselves unreservedly to the grace of God, there will be visitors even from far lands drawn here by Jesus, God's bright morning star. They will come to worship the one born King of the Jews and the Savior of the gentiles. They will come, drawn not by a star, but by God Himself. For even though human rebellion is deep and relentless, the mercy of God is cosmically greater. God promised in Isaiah that His Son Jesus is a banner that many will rally to. For the electricity of controversy also brings the electricity of conversion.

The Magi did not have the gospel. They did not have the Holy Spirit. They only had a star and a promise. Yet, when they found Jesus we read in Matthew 2:10-11, "11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts...." These big shots bowed to a child under two. They worshiped and presented Him with their treasure. In Messiah's presence their rebellion died.

Only the grace of God can bring any one of us out of our rebellion and into God's truth. And when the Spirit of God comes bearing the truth of God's Word and the grace to believe it, that is an electric moment. It's an Epiphany. For, conversion of the heart is the product of the gracious power of God that overcomes the vast power

of our rebellion. And God's grace is the only thing powerful enough to overcome our rebellion. It's the only thing powerful enough to pry us off God's throne, deciding good and evil for ourselves, so that we can instead bow down in fealty to the Holy One and His standards.

The initial stage of conversion moves us up to the third tier of faith – the place where we can say back to God, Your Word is true for me personally. Jesus Christ is my Savior. He is my Lord. You have justified my life with the blood of Messiah Jesus. But conversion does not end there. For the rebellion in us goes deep. Therefore, we will be confronted again and again with our rebellion. At each point Lord Holy Spirit will again graciously extend a personal invitation to each of us to bend the knee and have things God's way according to His Word. Conversion is indeed a powerful experience. It's an Epiphany that sets us free from slavery to ourselves and our sinful nature. It's the gracious gift of God in Messiah Jesus. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.