

Epiphany Sunday
January 3 & 4, 2025
American Lutheran Church
Rev. Lisa Hackler

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

We know the elements of this story well:

Wise men,

A star,

A long journey,

Gifts.

But Matthew doesn't tell it quickly. He lingers. And if we slow down with him, we notice something we often rush past. Before the gifts, before the treasure chests are opened, before anything is offered—the Magi kneel.

Matthew says they pay him homage.

That word sounds formal to us, maybe even polite. But in Matthew's world, homage was not sentimental. It was physical. You lowered yourself. You acknowledged an authority greater than your own. This was something you did for a king. This is what makes this scene so startling. They do not kneel in Herod's palace - they kneel before a child, with his mother nearby.

Herod, of course, had already used the word. He told the Magi he wanted to pay the child homage too. But, we know it was a lie. Herod has no intention of kneeling.

And yet Epiphany exposes a deeper irony. Herod speaks what should have been true. He should have knelt. He should have paid homage.

But kneeling for this puppet (or client) king of Rome would have meant letting go—of control, of certainty, of his claim to be the one in charge. And that is something Herod cannot imagine.

Everyone in the story hears the same news: a child has been born. But the responses could not be more different. For King Herod it is fear... anxiety... calculation. But for the wise man, it is kneeling.

What's striking is that the Magi do not come asking for anything. They do not come to get their needs met. They do not come looking for answers or solutions. They come for one purpose only: to pay homage.

Christ is put before them. They are led by a star, by Scripture, by God's own arranging. And, when they arrive, they kneel.

They recognize the Christ child—not because they understand everything, not because they have perfect theology, but because something has been revealed. This child claims their allegiance. And only then do they open their treasure chests. Matthew is careful about the order. Homage comes first. Then the gifts. This is not a transaction. It is a response.

From a Lutheran perspective, this matters deeply. Grace comes first. Christ is given to us before anything is asked, before anything is offered. Even the kneeling is not a work done to impress God. It is simply the posture of those who have encountered something holy.

It is said that when one of his students asked Martin Luther to define worship, he said it is the 10th leper turning back. And I think that gets at

the Thanksgiving aspect of worship. But worship, at its best, is also bending the knee.

Not literally—we are not talking about joints or bodies here. Speaking as one whose knees creak when I kneel, I know that some knees bend, some don't, and God is not impressed either way. Kneeling and bowing and bending the knee are metaphor. A way of speaking about the heart, about trust, about allegiance.

Worship, at its best, is the quiet confession: God is God. And I am not. That confession is not defeat. It is **relief**. Because if God is God, then the burden of being God is finally taken off our shoulders.

Something else happens in our gospel for today— very quietly. The star disappears from the story. It doesn't fail. It simply finishes its work. The sign that led them to Christ no longer leads them forward. From now on, they are guided by a dream, by trust, by obedience. They go home by another way.

Epiphany does not end with spectacle in the sky. It ends with changed direction on the ground. The Magi kneel. They offer their gifts. And they leave different than they arrived. Not because they set out to be changed. But because Christ was placed before them. And that, finally, is Epiphany.

Christ is revealed.

Christ is given.

And in that gift, our knees—however we imagine them—bend.

Thanks be to God. Amen