

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus came to be the Lord and Savior of all peoples. This tiny infant was sent on no small mission! He came for all peoples and nations. The Word became flesh to bring grace and truth to all peoples of all times. The wise men may have come seeking the King of the Jews. But they found someone who was much more than that. The reach of Jesus' kingdom is global in scope. It spans across time to touch even us today.

The wise men mark the beginning of Epiphany, but they've made it into the Christmas manger scene. The central figures are Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. Flanking them on one side, we see shepherds in their rustic clothing and sheep. And on the other side of the stable we see the three wise men in their opulent robes, bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The manger scene speaks volumes about who this baby is. Who comes to visit him? Who adores him on bended knee? Shepherds and wise men.

Shepherds and wise men. They represent two very unexpected groups of society. The shepherds were an undesirable lot. Shepherding was a bottom-rung job. It was dirty and hard and paid lousy wages. The shepherds represent the poorest of the poor. They're the marginal and unseen of society. But they are the first to hear the heavenly message that the Messiah has been born.

The wise men were simply foreigners. The star over Bethlehem sent out a signal to people the world over. Its message was broadcast beyond the boundaries of Israel. And the meaning of that star is loud and clear: This event is about something much bigger than just us. It's cosmic in scope. This event affects all of God's creation.

The wise men are one of the first stories in Matthew's. They were searchers. These learned men knew the night skies. When this new star presented itself, they took note.

Matthew concludes his gospel with the Great Commission. The risen Jesus sends his disciples outward. "Go and make disciples of ALL NATIONS, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I've commanded you."

His gospel begins with foreigners who came seeking the Messiah. The movement was from the outsiders looking in. They came searching. But at the end of the gospel, the movement has reversed. The church is propelled outwards. Christ's mission impels us to reach out.

One of our challenges is our desire to be around people who are like us. LCC is 96% Caucasian by membership as of 2018. But our country isn't 96% white. Granted, our rural communities run with a higher percentage of people of northern European descent. But the call and the challenge remain before us. They urge us outwards. It is our commission.

The message of Christ and his gospel of life is meant for all people of every time and place. As Christ's church, we are called outward. Simply put, the church exists for Christ's sake. We have no other purpose than to go and proclaim Christ in word and deed. We speak on Christ's behalf. We carry on with acts of mercy for his name's sake.

But the Herods of this world have other ideas. They have alternate priorities. Herod's agendas move in a different direction. The problem is when we as the church internalize the impulses of Herod into our purpose.

Herod wants to pull us away from Jesus and his mission. Herod's priorities might seem worthy and even honorable. But in the end, they divert us away from Jesus. There is no other center for us than Jesus.

These Herods can come in big or small sizes. But they all divert us from our true center. An example of a small Herod is when our top priority is to keep our church tidy and clean. If there are groups that use a space and happen to leave a little mess, the alarm bells go off! Maybe the youth group left a little popcorn in the basement. Or maybe the pastor left a light on. Before you know it, the wagons have circled, and strict limitations are spelled out limiting what activities can occur.

There are small Herods, and then there are big Herods. A big Herod would be Christian nationalism. In Christian nationalism, the church doesn't solely exist for Christ's sake. Its purpose becomes so closely affiliated with patriotism that the boundary separating loyalty to country with adoration of Christ becomes blurred. Examples would be the German state church during the Nazi regime. Christian nationalism also lured the Church of England under the era of British imperial expansionism. The spread of the British state and culture became blurred with God's divine plan for the world's advancement.

But the church exists for Christ's sake. It doesn't exist for the advancement of any nation. The church of Christ spreads beyond all political borders. The star of Bethlehem spread its light to the world, to all peoples.

Another big Herod facing the church is our human proclivity to homogeneity. Very simply, “birds of a feather flock together.” We're more comfortable being around people who are just like us. Being around people who are different than us takes us out of our comfort zone. We want to sing the hymns from our own cultural traditions and worship in the way that's comfortable to us. If “they” want to join “us,” that's just fine. But we aren't about to change our ways.

But Christ's commission to his church is directed outwards. He calls us outward, to proclaim his gospel to the nations. Christ calls us out of our

homogeneity and out of our comfort zones. He calls us to the alien, to the minority and the marginalized. He sends us to the one who is on the outside looking in. He calls us to see our brother and sister in Christ even in those who don't look like us.

We're at the point now where we're taking down our Christmas decorations. We all have Christmas ornaments we cherish. When I was a small child, someone at my old church donated some handmade ornaments. I loved these ornaments. They depicted angel faces. But the angels were little children. What made them so unique is that these children reflected the children of many different races. There was an Eskimo angel and an Indian angel. There were angels from China and Africa as well as Europe. What impressed me as that small child was, how all of the world's people were represented in the faces of those angels. They witnessed to me.

The Star of Bethlehem is a beacon to the whole world. We all come to worship him. Amen.