

During the Second World War, the Allies gained a huge advantage by the success of their code-breaking operations. The German armed forces used their famous “Enigma” machines to transmit coded messages—messages that they were confident could not be read by the Allies. But, for much of the war, the Allies could decipher these coded messages—and use this information to stay one step ahead of the Nazis. This shortened the war—in most estimations—by a year or two. Without being able to read these coded messages, the Allies would have had a tougher and longer fight to defeat Nazi Germany.

This is just one example of the importance of codes. Codes and code breaking are an intriguing art and science. The person sending a message in code sends that message so that anyone can read what it says—but only the person with the right decoder will know what it means. Without understanding the code, the message makes no sense. Countless people could see the message and have no idea what it means; the one with the right decoder would not only see the message; he would understand what it meant.

In a similar way, Epiphany shows God speaking to man, but few understanding the message that He sent. The message in “code”—if you will—was seen by many, but understood by only a precious few; only the Wise Men, the Magi from the East. They understood the message as God opened their eyes to see and understand. The message that they saw was the star—the star that rose to announce the birth of the King of the Jews.

God spoke by that star. This was no ordinary star. It appeared not just to mark out days and seasons and years; it appeared to declare to the wise men that the King of the Jews had been born. Think about it: anyone who turned his eyes heavenward could see that star. It twinkled at them, just as it twinkled at the wise men. But this star brought no rush of visitors to the newborn

King. Jerusalem was not overrun; Bethlehem remained undisturbed. Israel did not understand the meaning of this star. Even if they turned their eyes heavenward and viewed the star, they did not perceive what it meant; it was as if they were staring at a coded message without the decoder.

But the Wise Men knew its meaning. How they knew remains a mystery. Perhaps the knowledge of this star and its meaning had been declared by a prophet during Israel's exile in the East; perhaps God had sent another messenger to the East to proclaim the meaning of this star. However they came to know it, the wise men knew that this star proclaimed the birth of the King of the Jews. They saw the star; they understood its message. In faith they set out; they hearkened to this message and left to find the King of the Jews. They left to worship Him. They went to the logical place, to Jerusalem. There, in the royal city of the Jews; there, where David and Solomon and their sons reigned, the wise men expected to find the newborn king.

But, as you well know, Jesus was not to be found in Jerusalem. The only king in that city was Herod. Herod, enthroned in his palace, safe behind walls and guards, did not care for the wise men's troubling question. Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? they ask Herod—himself the king. Herod was not king by choice of the Jews. He was a foreigner, appointed by the Romans; to the Jews, Herod was a stinging reminder that they no longer ruled their own land. Herod is troubled by the wise men and their search for a newborn king. He sees this king as a threat, a revolution in the making. Jerusalem is troubled with him. Is not this amazing? God's people, Israel, remained deaf to His Word! The King of the Jews was born—the wise men tell them that His star has risen—and Israel does not care. Worse, they see Him as a threat; they are TROUBLED at His birth. Israel had become deaf to God's Word, deaf to His promises to deliver them. They lacked wisdom: they hear the news, but it does them no good. They do not seek the King as their Messiah and Savior; they remain stuck in folly and unbelief.

Herod goes a step further: he wants to destroy the king. Wipe out this rival before He is a real threat. And so Herod does some research. He turns to the scribes, those who knew the Scriptures best. He asks: where is the Christ to be born? The question reveals Herod's blindness and folly. He knows that the King means the Christ: but Herod wants only to destroy Him! The scribes' answer likewise condemns them. They know the passage; they know the promise. But even with the words there, on their lips, they do not seek the Christ. They simply give Herod the answer he wants: The Christ is to be born in Bethlehem, as God prophesied through Micah: "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." They themselves speak the words—but they remain a coded message; one they do not understand—or at least one they do not believe. This ruler would shepherd God's people, Israel; but the scribes don't care. They don't go. They report to Herod and return home, deaf to what God was telling them in that passage they quoted.

Not so the Wise Men. They go to find this King. They go to worship Him. Their hearts have been opened; their ears are attuned to understand God's message to man. They seek the newborn King; they go to pay Him homage. And they get their directions from Herod and the scribes. God uses these unlikely messengers—unbelieving Herod and his scholars—to lead the wise men to Jesus. This is a wonder indeed!

As the wise men go, making the short trip to Bethlehem, the star appears once again. This time it leads them to Bethlehem; it rests over the very place where the child lay. The wise men see the star, and REJOICE! They see AND understand. They hear AND believe. They are filled with great joy as God leads them to the King, to their Savior, to Jesus.

When they find Him, the wise men bow down and worship this newborn King. They bring costly gifts and present them to Jesus—gold, valuable then as it is now; frankincense—a type of perfume and incense, part of the incense burned at the temple as Israel’s prayers rose to God; and myrrh—another type of costly perfume. They worship the King they had sought long and far.

The Wise Men heard and believed. This is true wisdom—the wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord; the wisdom that hears His Word, understands what God says, and believes that same Word. True wisdom joins faith to hearing; true wisdom believes the Word of God. The wise men from the east hear one more Word of God and believe. This time God speaks in a dream and warns them not to return to Herod. The wise men hear and believe; they find another way home. And then, they disappear from Scripture. Where they came from, where they went, how they knew about the star: these questions are unanswered. What IS answered, what IS spoken to us, is that these men were WISE. They stand as examples of those who hear the Word of God and believe it; examples of those who demonstrate such true wisdom—the wisdom of faith worked in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. They show, from the beginning of Christ’s life, that Christ came to save ALL men—Jew and Gentile alike; His people Israel along with men from every tribe and nation under heaven.

God speaks to us still today by His Word. He led the wise men to Jesus through the star, through the prophecy of Micah, through Herod and the scribes. He leads us to Christ as well—not with a star that leads us to Bethlehem, but now by His Word spoken to us. This is the light that shines upon us. In the words of Scripture the true light dawns upon us as Christ enters our dark world. The light of God’s Word leads us to our Savior. This Word does not lead us to a house in Bethlehem, for the infant Christ no longer lies there. Instead, He has ascended to the

right hand of the Father, filling all things. He is found now in His Word, in His sacraments. Where this Word is proclaimed, where believers gather around that Word; there is Christ. There shines the true light who brings life to man. Where the waters of baptism drip from the baptized; where the bread and wine of communion are eaten and drunk, there is Christ: adopting new children, feeding His baptized children. But all of this is seen and understood only by those called to faith. Only those who are wise understand what God is saying and doing here. Unbelievers who see it miss its message, even as Herod and his scribes did.

God's Word declares that this child of Bethlehem is our King; His Word points us to this Jesus as the ruler who shepherds His people, Israel. And we are part of Israel; we are made God's people. He has gathered us into Jesus' Kingdom, so that this King rules over us. This King defends us from our enemies; this King provides all that we need; this King drives back death to bring us life.

As unlikely as it sounds, God's Word declares that this Son of Mary is God Himself. This is the ruler prophesied by Micah whose origins are from of old, from ancient days. This child is the eternal Lord. Here lies the mystery of Christmas, made known at Epiphany: This child is God in the flesh! He is hidden in plain sight. Another coded message, so to speak. The people in Bethlehem would have seen nothing special about this child. Another infant; another baby boy cradled in His mother's arms. No halo; no neon sign—just a baby. But to those who understood; to those whose eyes were opened by the Holy Spirit, this baby was THE child, the newborn King of the Jews. God grant such wisdom always to us, that we look upon Jesus as our King!

God's Word still calls for wisdom—true wisdom. It is possible to hear that Word, but not understand it. It is possible to use that Word, but not profit from it. Many today, like Herod, still

twist God's Word for their own ends. They read it not to find Christ, but to seek answers for other issues apart from Christ. They miss the point; they miss the greatest blessing of Scripture, even as the scribes did who sent the wise men to find Jesus, but did not seek Him themselves. Others will simply ignore or rewrite those parts of Scripture that they do not like. Oh yes, they say, God may have forbidden adultery, but that was before man understood how things ought to work; surely that doesn't apply in our day and age. Oh yes, God calls us to be merciful and help those in need, but I need more for myself first; surely that only applies to people who have more than I do. Oh yes, God says—but we are quick to explain away that part that we don't like. God preserve us from such abuse of His Word. God instead open our ears and our hearts to hear, to understand, and to believe His Word; God lead us to receive that Word with joy and gladly do what it says. Above all, God lead us to cling to our Savior in faith, trusting that the King born in Bethlehem is our King, shepherding us through this life. God grant such wisdom to us all!

God's Word has dawned upon you. By your faith, granted in your baptism, God has given you the ears and heart of faith, the wisdom that hears and believes His Word. He now preserves that faith by His same Word. Now, as the glow of Christmas fades, may God lead us to abide in that Word; may He lead us often to hear that Word as it proclaims that this child was born to be our eternal King. Amen.