

## “The Magi Followed Their Star of Truth”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

Rev. Kit B. Billings, M.Div, MA, BCC

January 2, 2022

### Scriptures

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Matthew 2:1-12

### CHRISTMAS CAROLS for Jan. 2<sup>nd</sup>

*O Little Town of Bethlehem 511*

*We Three Kings 515*

*What Child Is This 281*

### **Jeremiah 31:7-14**

<sup>7</sup> For thus says the LORD:

“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,  
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;  
proclaim, give praise, and say,  
‘O LORD, save your people,  
the remnant of Israel.’

<sup>8</sup> Behold, I will bring them from the north country  
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,  
among them the blind and the lame,  
the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together;  
a great company, they shall return here.

<sup>9</sup> With weeping they shall come,  
and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back,  
I will make them walk by brooks of water,  
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble,  
for I am a father to Israel,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

<sup>10</sup> “Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’

<sup>11</sup> For the LORD has ransomed Jacob  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

<sup>12</sup> They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall be like a watered garden,  
and they shall languish no more.

<sup>13</sup> Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.

I will turn their mourning into joy;  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.  
<sup>14</sup> I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance,  
and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness,  
declares the LORD.”

### **Matthew 2:7-15**

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

### ***The Flight to Egypt***

<sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Loving God, you fill all things with a fullness and hope that we can often barely comprehend. Thank you for leading us into a time where more of reality is being unveiled for us all to see. We pray that you will take away our natural temptation for cynicism, denial, fear and despair. Help us have the courage to awaken to greater, illuminating truth, to deeper humility and to greater care for one another. May we place our hope in what matters and in what lasts, trusting in your eternal presence and love. Listen to our hearts’ longings for the healing of our suffering world, and guide us ever onward to finding a new birth of your Holy Spirit in and around us. We pray these things in your many holy Names. Amen

### **The Lord’s Prayer**

Song: “We Three Kings”

### **Insight for Worship**

*Secrets of Heaven* n. 9293: "By 'gold, frankincense, and myrrh' are signified all things of the goodness of love in action and of faith in the Lord; by 'gold' those of the good of love; by 'frankincense' those of the good of faith; and by 'myrrh' those of both in things external. The reason why the Wise Men from the East offered these things, was that among some in the East there remained from ancient times the knowledge and wisdom of the men of old, which consisted in understanding and seeing heavenly and Divine things in those which are in the world and upon the earth. For it was known to the ancients that all things correspond and are symbolic, and consequently have an inner meaning or signification; as is also evident from, the most ancient books and monuments of the Gentiles. Consequently they knew that gold, frankincense, and myrrh signify the goods that are to be offered to God. They also knew from their prophetic writings, which were of the Ancient Church, that the Lord was to come into the world, and that a star would then appear to them."

### **HOMILY: “The Magi Followed Their Star of Truth”**

In the New Testament of God’s Holy Word, we have two very amazing, gripping, and in many ways very different accounts of what preceded and then happened when God was born into our world as a baby in Jesus Christ. We have Matthew’s account, which is told primarily from Joseph’s perspective and experience, and we have Luke’s account, told through Mary and her side of the family, such as through her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias. In *Luke* there is much innocence and no commands were given. Instead in *Luke* we have angels visiting Mary, Zacharias and the shepherds. In *Matthew* the angels only visit people in dreams and King Herod plays a large, threatening role. These two accounts, one in *Matthew* and the other in *Luke*, are very harmonious, and each account is so poignant and awesome that all Christians perceive them as fitting beautifully together into one whole story, which we call Christmas.

Today is January 2, which is traditionally known as Epiphany Sunday because it is the Sunday just before January 6, which marks the twelfth day after Christmas when a feast day is celebrated in honor of the fantastic, long journey and visit of the Wise Men from the East who traveled far to find the manifestation of God born into our world as a baby who would become King. This story lifts up to us all that even during our times in our regeneration journeys through life when God’s living presence around us feels very far away, a long distance from our consciousness, if we choose to be wise like the Magi and willing to follow the truths from God’s Word that stand out to us like a guiding star calling us forward, then like the Wise Men we will be led through deserts and through the darkness of night, to find a new epiphany of the Lord within our hearts—where we may fall down in worship and adoration, giving the Lord our spiritual gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi’s story reminds us that sometimes we will be led much more through our thinking and understanding of truth, where we may experience God telling

us what to do in Scripture, just as Joseph received commands to take Mary as his wife and go to Bethlehem and then depart another way through Egypt.

At other times in our spiritual journeys in life we can feel much closer to God through birthings of new, good loves and affections of truth, where a new birthing of compassionate faith and goodness happens in our hearts, making lovingkindness easy, like the shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem whose journey to find the baby Jesus was relatively fast and easy. But Epiphany Sunday lifts up the Magi's long journey, slow experience of seeking the baby Jesus will be our lot at times, and at other times the faster and overall more heart centered experience of Mary, Elizabeth and the shepherds will be our experience. Both narratives are symbolically present in us at different states of being, each one playing a role in our transformation into finding a new will, thriving with conscience and ripe compassionate caring towards all.

Luke's Christmas story is very different. The Lukan story of Advent and Christmas centers upon Mary's experience of seeing an angel telling that through her womb the Holy Spirit would conceive the Savior of the world, and again of more angels literally visiting Zacharias, and then they come again to simple, trusting shepherds out in the fields, who saw a great Light, informing them of the birth of a newborn babe laying in a manger whose coming was the greatest of good tidings of unending joy.

The Magi's story teaches us some extremely important truths for our lives today, because the preparation for and then taking their long trek to find the baby Messiah reminds us that part of our journey of lifelong spiritual development involves times when we are not always conscious of the Lord working in our lives. These are times when we want the Lord very much involved in our lives, but we feel inside like He is "not near." This theme was echoed long before Advent came into being. We read this in *Numbers 24:17*, "I see Him but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob; a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy the sons of tumult."

In actuality, the Lord's infinite and Divine presence in our lives is like the miraculous air we breathe that is full and rich with life-giving oxygen! God's living, constant presence in our lives is actually an integral part of our lives, just as the atmosphere and air we breathe moment by moment is too. We each are breathing constantly without being aware of the life-giving chemical reactions happening all the time in our lungs, keeping our bodies alive. For most of us it is a very rare thing for us to perceive that without Earth's atmosphere, all forms of life on Earth would cease to exist.

The Lord was born on Earth 2,022 years ago so that we could become aware of His loving and merciful ways. By knowing, essentially, who the Lord is and how divinely loving He always is with those near Him, we can begin to become aware of the ways that the Lord is working continuously in our lives—giving us His many gifts, leading us

forward, creating a circle of close friends around us, creating our circle of life for us and sustaining us!

The truth is that the Lord is as present and vitally important in our moment-by-moment existence as air is to the survival of our bodies. And if we choose to consciously breathe in and use the truths in God's Word that we find illuminating in an authentic way, like that great star the Wise Men followed until it shined right above Mary, Joseph and their baby Jesus. Epiphany reminds us that we also need to keep our eyes open and ready to see the Light of truth in God's Word illuminating spiritual truth for us to follow where it leads us. It could be just one vital truth keeping us on track, such as the Golden Rule (treat others as I would like to be treated), or the Two Greatest Commandments Christ gave us, or one or two of the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Mtt. 5:3,7). Or perhaps your shining, guiding star of truth is one or two of the Ten Commandments that light up the sky of our mind, leading us back into a living, personal growth of faith inspired by love-in-action, as we find are led on a long journey to eventually find a new birthing of the Lord's presence in our lives.

Then, like the Magi, we are blessed to bring our own gifts of spiritual gold (love for the Lord), of faith in Him (frankincense) and in obedience to His Word (symbolized by the bitter herb resin called myrrh), which is not always easy, but if we ask our almighty Lord of pure love and wisdom for help, He always can be found in humility like a newborn babe laying within a manger. And the soul of this glorious baby made from God Himself is none other than God Himself. Falling down and worshiping this humble, infant Lord becomes a regular way of living, giving the Lord our deepest love, giving Him our faith in His power to guide and transform our lives, and dedicating our lives each day to His ways and values, then Christmas comes to us like it did to the Magi.

This then causes the miracle of a new depth of will in our hearts, inspired by a growing conscience in us to abhor what is evil and live by the goodness we receive from God-manifest in Bethlehem. This goodness can take many different forms, for example:

- Thinking about what talents and skills we have, and then using those to help people
- Doing our jobs honestly, justly and faithfully
- Forgiving those who trespass against us
- Showing compassion for people going through hard times
- Listening carefully to others
- Thoughtfully offering a smile, a kind word, or a hug, because we can
- Holding the door for someone
- Thinking about what other people would like and then getting it or doing it for them
- Offering encouragement

- Doing our best to be just, merciful, and humble with the people around us (See Micah 6:8)
- Expressing gratitude to the Lord and the people around us

These are some of the Christmas presents that we can plan to give to the Lord every year. And just as the Magi were wealthy enough to afford those precious gifts, our intellect is also rich enough to plan for and acquire these precious gifts—gifts which we ultimately receive from the Lord and gratefully return to Him in the form of love for others. So in this New Year, as we think about ways to become more loving people, remember to follow the Star—that “idea of love” which can lead us to the Lord.

In conclusion, in our theology we read in *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine n. 177*: “You cannot be spiritually reborn without some knowledge of the new or spiritual life.” Amen.