

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany; January 10, 2021

What are some tools that we need at our homes? Scissors. A wrench. A hammer. A screwdriver. But there is one device that I would almost guaranty that each of you have in your homes. You want to guess what it is? A plunger. (Show plunger.) It is a device that is designed to fix just one problem in your house. Right? They are not used to hang things on a wall. They are not a toy that you play with. Plungers are a dirty tool for a dirty job. When the toilet gets stopped up and the water starts rising, you need something to unblock the clog. Flushing won't help because it will only make the mess worse, and if you wait too long, the water backs up and overflows on the floor.

The plunger is a useful reminder of another dirty tool: the cross. The cross was a tool used to execute the worst of criminals. It was a terrible, filthy way to die, full of dirt, splinters, and blood. And yet the cross was the only way that God could unclog the mess in our lives known as sin! When the people of Jesus' day saw a cross, they saw a gross, disgusting, dirty instrument. Yet, on the cross we see a Savior pay for our sins through his death.

Jesus' purpose for being born in a manger was clear. The angel spoke to Joseph about Mary and the child she was carrying and said: **"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."** There is one obvious question: *Who is HIS PEOPLE?* The Jewish person hearing those words of Matthew would think of themselves. The first century Jewish community in the Holy Land was occupied and oppressed by the Romans. Before that that had been ruled by the Greeks, and before them the Persians. At the time of Jesus, much of the land was owned by foreigners who controlled huge estates. Local farmers were forced to pay rent and were treated badly. They knew how it felt to be economically and politically oppressed.

In a situation of political and economic oppression, people naturally wanted salvation, but salvation from what? They were looking for rescue from their oppressors. So, it is pretty easy to see that when God's prophets talked about *sin* and *salvation* while they were being oppressed, those words were already defined in their minds.

The concept of *sin* is shaped by what they are experiencing from their oppressors. The word *salvation* is used to express their longing to be free from that oppression. If that is how you define *sin* and *salvation*, it is pretty easy to see how the Jewish people in the days of Jesus wanted to be free from the Romans.

They had seen the Romans do some pretty horrible things. Later in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 13), it is reported to Jesus that Pilate had killed some worshippers in the temple while they were offering sacrifices at the altar. They were angry at Pilate for doing such a horrible thing. (I think we could understand that anger if someone would carry out such a horrible thing in a church today.) They lived in a very messy world and were looking for a Savior to come and clean up this mess.

Yet, they were looking at the wrong mess. What they really needed was someone to rescue them from *their sins*. However, these wise men weren't looking for that kind of a Savior. They came looking for a different kind of king. **"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."** These were not amateur star gazers. They were scholars. They had a broad knowledge of all kinds of things – science, astronomy, medicine, history, law, and theology. They were royal advisors who interpreted dreams, and studied astrology and magic. Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth we encounter Wise Men or Magi in the Old Testament book of Daniel. These Wise Men were used to searching the skies. Because of their interest in astronomy and astrology, they noticed the star that God had set in the heavens to announce the birth of His Son. Have you ever wondered: *"How did they know that?"* How did they know that this new star was a birth announcement? How did they do that?

They saw it in the Bible. There is a passage in the Old Testament that says: **"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."** (Numbers 24:17) Somehow they had come into contact with the prophecies of the Old Testament. As the children of Israel were carried off into captivity hundreds of years earlier, one of

God's prophets became one of those wise men. His name is Daniel. Perhaps, Daniel may have told them about the account in Numbers. Maybe he had shared with them the words of Isaiah. Remember these men were scholars. Somehow they began to connect the dots. They figured out that something pretty amazing had just happened. **"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."** They knew that much, but they didn't know who he was and exactly where he was. So, they started on a journey to find the answer to those questions.

Many of you know that we were on vacation the week after Christmas. The natural question that people had asked us was: *Where are you going?* We knew we were heading to the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. We knew that we wanted to see a National Park in South Carolina. We knew that we wanted to be outside and away from crowds. But beyond that, we really didn't know where we were going. We made it up each day. Eventually, we made it into northeast Florida because we were trying to get away from the rain that was coming to that part of the country. It's not the first time we've done this. In fact, most of our vacations are often done like this. I know that would drive some of you crazy – to not know where you are going before you leave.

These men knew that something big had just happened, they just didn't know where. So, they start their journey westward. Now think about that. Many of us have memorized these words: **"We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."** If the magi were east of Israel, and they saw his star in the *East*, they should have ended up in India. You may have noticed something different when I read the Gospel Lesson today. **"We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."** The word that has been translated as the *"East"* can also mean: *"Rising."* If it is translated that way, this all makes a whole lot more sense.

When these men arrived in Jerusalem to find out who he was and where he was, the chief priests and the teachers quote another prophesy in the Old Testament. There it said that he was born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2,4). It would be there that they would find Jesus. When they saw Jesus, **"they were overjoyed."**

Can you imagine what it must have been like for them that as they talked with Mary and Joseph to find out who this child and is what he had come to do. Remember back in the beginning of this sermon, I asked the question: *"Who is His People."* The answer wasn't just the Jewish people, he also came to save them. He came to save all people. This young child was going to save the world from their sin. When those wise men left, they carried that message across the world. That's why we celebrate Epiphany. That message was carried to you and me as well. We have a Savior who has cleaned up the mess of sin on the horrible tool of a cross so that someday we will be with him forever. Amen.