

Matthew 2: 1-12 – “*So May We . . .*”
Epiphany Day – January 2, 2018

It is often said that hymns are sermons in song. That’s because a lot of men through the years who wrote the hymns also gave the sermons. That is to say, hymn writers are often pastors. That is not the case with the hymn we just sang. William C. Dix, the writer of the text, was not a pastor, but spent most of his life as the manager of an insurance company in Glasgow, Scotland. Sick in bed, he missed the Epiphany service at his church in 1858. He contemplated the Biblical text and since he often wrote Christian poetry, he came up with this hymn, written by nightfall of the same day it was begun. By the way, Dix has three other hymns in our hymnal – one of which we sang on Christmas Eve, “*What Child is This.*” Tonight we use Dix’s Epiphany hymn, “*As with Gladness Men of Old*” as the outline of our sermon. In the first three stanzas he equates the journey of the magi with a Christian’s pilgrimage through life, using the words *so may we* to implore the Lord to empower us to follow their example. In the last two stanzas he structures the hymn in the form of a prayer focused on the goal of that pilgrimage.

*Stanza 1: As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold;
As with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright.
So most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led by Thee.*

Epiphany comes at the beginning of a new civic calendar year. People make a lot of resolutions. Christians do, too. Perhaps we have resolved to read the Bible more. That’s a worthy goal. After all, Scripture is a *lamp to our feet and a light to our path*. The magi had the star; we have God’s Word. Do we make use of it regularly? Does it determine how we live our life? Or are our standards and morality set by the ways of the world instead of the Truth of the Word? Do we hail its light with joy even if it speaks a word of strict Law to us? Not always. We have sinned in this regard. Forgive us, good Lord.

*Stanza 2: As with joyful steps they sped, Savior, to Thy lowly bed.
There to bend the knee before, Thee, whom heav’n and earth adore;
So, may we with willing feet ever seek Thy mercy seat.*

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that because of Jesus, our great High Priest, we can approach the throne of God with boldness and confidence. Does that characterize our prayer life? Or is it sporadic, like our study and reading of Scripture can be? Have you ever promised someone, “*I’ll pray for you,*” and then forgotten about it until you see them two weeks later coming toward you, and quickly pray, “*Lord, bless, my friend.*” And then smugly say, “*I have been praying for you.*” Perhaps we would do better to write it down in a prayer journal and have a set time each day when we intentionally pray, in addition to all the other occasions when we can make shorter, impromptu

petitions. So, we fall short in this area, too, failing to “*bend the knee before Thee, whom heaven and earth adore.*” Forgive us, good Lord. Help us, good Lord.

*Stanza 3: As they offered gifts most rare at Thy cradle, rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy, Pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ to Thee, our heavenly King.'*

By now, the accusing finger of the Law should already be poking us in the chest and piercing us in the conscience. Here, too, we fall short. It's so sinfully easy to use our time, talents, and material resources for ourselves rather than for the Lord and His people. It's so sinfully easy to give Him the leftovers instead of the first fruits. It's so sinfully easy to consider serving and giving as a burden and obligation rather than a joy and a blessing. Forgive us, good Lord. Help us, good Lord.

William Dix has preached the Law to us in the first three stanzas of this hymn. That will always be the case when God's Word in any form – sung, read, or heard – is honestly applied to our life. We fall short of the standards our Father in heaven sets for us. We are imperfect people. We fail to always follow the model of the magi and their devotion - offering their gifts, falling down, and worshipping the newborn King. That is why we thank and praise God that He sent us His Son, who is more than a mere model; He is also our Savior. Again, the prophecies of Isaiah hold true, “*Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*” Our Savior Himself said, “*I am the light of the world; He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*”

The One who illuminated the world with His grace and mercy, would offer up His life, suppress the radiance of His glory for a time, and become obedient unto death on the cross on a dark Friday for us. His work on our behalf brings forgiveness, life, and salvation. Furthermore, it is the motivation for holy living. We need Jesus. We can't do it ourselves. So let this prayer be on our lips:

*Holy Jesus, ev'ry day Keep us in the narrow way;
And when earthly things are past, bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide, where no clouds Thy glory hide.*

*In the heavenly country bright need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown, Thou its sun which goes not down.
There forever may we sing Alleluias to our King.*

God grant it to each of us, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

*Holy Cross Lutheran Church (LCMS) – Moline, IL
Rev. Dr. Wilfred L. Karsten, Pastor*