

"THE SUPPORTING CAST OF THE STAR"

A sermon delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia

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Dear star gazing members of the cast of this year's Epiphany extravaganza:

Our Epiphany celebration centers on an account in Matthew's gospel where he relates an unusual story filled with high drama, mystery and intrigue. It has all the elements of a smash hit: highlighting a rare historical event, featuring searching detectives who turn out to be heroes, a snidely villain with ulterior motives, a thrilling climax, and a switcheroo ending that claims success for the good guys, foils the villain's evil plans, and leaves the reader feeling a sense of satisfaction and closure. All these elements are included in the supporting cast of the star. So, let the show begin!

The overture to Act I paints a mood of serenity with soothing violins to picture a vast starry array; but soon the tempo quickens as woodwinds are joined by French horns and the volume crescendos with blaring trumpets that signal a heavenly phenomenon -- a unique star -- a star ten times brighter than all the rest; a star that is slowly moving in a westerly direction; a star that captures the attention and imagination of scientists of that day, a star that is interpreted as the sign of a king's birth among the Jewish people.

The curtain opens as Act I begins, and we see members of the supporting cast following that star's journey wherever it takes them to find the royal one whose birth it heralds. They assumed Jerusalem would be their destination, since it was the seat of the current king. But their inquiries in the market place find people clueless about such an event and made fearful by their question because their political situation was so tenuous it didn't need or welcome some upstart throne usurper to tilt that balance and bring certain pain and possible bloodshed. Act I ends with an informant whispering they might better check at the palace with the current king. So off they go in their quest, taking a brief moment to notice that the star is impatiently waiting.

Act II introduces a member of what turns out to be the non-supporting cast in the form of the story's villain – King Herod -- whom history would dub "the great." Now in the last years of a long reign, aging Herod had survived several plots and attempts on his life by those who wanted to replace him, among which were a few of his former sons from his ten different wives. Paranoia is an inadequate word to describe this man possessed for whom the news of a newborn king was the last thing he needed to hear and, if true, had to be quickly extinguished.

Quickly consulting with his advisors, they do their equivalent of a Google search and it is determined from the prophet Micah that little Bethlehem is the strongest possibility. Armed with the "place" information, Herod must now determine the time frame. Act II ends with Herod securing that data and smugly sending the searchers off to find the newborn king of the Jews with this proviso that, when they do, they report back to him so that he can do what he deems needs to be done, and it isn't paying homage to some little threatening messianic pretender.

The final act begins the same as the first only now the searchers taste success as the stalled star begins moving again and finally, like a good GPS, announces, "You have reached your destination," by stopping at the correct address. It now becomes apparent to all that the real star of Epiphany is not the one in the sky, but the one in the arms of his mother, Mary. Joy and celebration fill the house as kingly homage is paid the Christ child and expensive gifts fit for a king are bestowed in the forms of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The drama comes to close as these wise men prepare to return. But there is still one piece of unfinished business that leaves the audience hanging. What cruel fate awaits this star of epiphany when the vile villain Herod learns of his specific whereabouts? To everyone's great relief that never happens, because at the last minute, an angelic message redirects their return plans by skipping the report to Herod, and taking an alternate route home. The final curtain falls, and it's time for the supporting cast and the star to make their curtain calls.

King Herod comes first and the applause is very limited. Like many maniacal leaders Herod did a lot of good things. He was an outstanding soldier, an adroit politician and a master builder. The palaces he built at Masada and the Herodium (only three miles from Bethlehem) were sumptuous; the city dedicated to Caesar -- Caesarea with its artificial harbor -- was fantastic; his crowning achievement was the temple in Jerusalem which became one of the wonders of the ancient world. Yet, he was despised because he could be cruel and ruthless. Prior to his death, he ordered the heads of 200 prominent families locked up in the hippodrome in Jericho with the order that they be killed at his death just so that there would be weeping at his departure, making his massacre of the Bethlehem infants seem small in comparison.

Next at curtain call come the most prominent members of the supporting cast -- the wise men from the east. Tradition has created identities for them as kings, probably from the Isaiah prophecy in our Old Testament lesson. They are remembered as three in number, probably because of the three gifts mentioned in our text. Tradition also identifies them as gentiles, thus making Epiphany the first proclamation and reception of the gospel message to the gentiles, the theme Paul iterates in our epistle lesson. Truth be told, we don't know who or how many, or what their ethnic origin. Yet we can be eternally grateful for their example of doggedly and persistently searching for and finally finding the real star of Epiphany who turned out to be more than simply the king of the Jews.

At last the Star himself steps into the limelight, held in his mother's arms. Yet we see him in other forms. Though he escaped death by Herod at this point, that title "king of the Jews" would become the epitaph on his cross as he poured out his blood so that it would become the tree of knowledge, making us wise unto salvation. We applaud him not only as the star of our lives but the star that lives in our hearts and guides our actions until the divine GPS announces, "You have reached your final destination."

Finally, how about you? The Star of Epiphany has taken you from being a viewer in the audience and made you a member of the supporting cast. What an Honor!!! By your exemplary daily living and your persistent speaking to others about the Star of Epiphany, you are pointing other searchers to the rich resource of salvation as you help them live out epiphany -- that light from above -- in their lives. So, take a bow, and then, get ready because the same show begins again tomorrow. Congratulations to all the members of the supporting cast of the Epiphany Star. Amen