Epiphany of Our Lord (Observed) – January 5, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Matthew 2:1-12 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
Even though it is still Christmas today, I suspect that most Christmas decorations are down by now. I came from an unusual family that attempted to celebrate the twelve days of Christmas by putting up our Christmas tree on December 23, the day before Christmas began, and taking it down on the evening of January 5th the last day of Christmas. There are a few manger scenes still up around town, one of them quite near our house, but it's probably too late to do the little exercise I have in mind. So file this away for next year: Next year when the manger scenes do go up around town again, have a look and see how many of them have both the shepherds and the wise men together at the manger. I'm going to guess you'll find very few, if any, that don't. I haven't actually done this exercise myself, but I'm going to try to remember come next December. But there's no escaping the conflation of the two very different biblical stories of Jesus birth that has occurred in the popular imagination. It has even crept into our hymns. Our final hymn this morning, *The First Noel*, says, in the second verse, that the shepherds looked up and saw a star shining in the east, and then the third verse begins, "And by the light of that same star, three wise men came from country far." But here's the thing: the shepherds come from Luke's Gospel, and there is no star in that story. The wise men come from Matthew's Gospel, and there are no shepherds in that story. And there's no manger either. In fact, from internal evidence in Matthew – in the story that comes next, actually – we can infer that the wise men didn't show up in Jerusalem, and then Bethlehem, until about two years after Jesus was born. And that is why in my own creche set at home I have three different Marys. I have Advent Mary, Christmas Mary, and Epiphany Mary. Advent Mary is pregnant, Christmas Mary is kneeling at the manger, and Epiphany Mary is standing up and holding a toddler in her arms.

Now I expect that most of you will probably think I'm making too much of these details. But that's kind of my job. I won't presume to tell you what to include in your own manger scenes at home, but there is a good reason to keep these stories in Luke and Matthew separate, and that is so that we can understand the message that each is trying to get across to us. You heard what I though Luke's message was on Christmas Eve. Today we get a chance, that we don't get every year, to consider Matthew's message.

I want to quickly focus now on three things from Matthew's story of the wise men and how they are directly relevant to our lives of faith. First, I want us to notice how this story fits into the overall structure of Matthew. And to best appreciate that we need to go to the very end of the Gospel, where the disciples meet Jesus after his resurrection. Three things are notable there and they are reflected in our story today, so that the Gospel of Matthew is bookended with these themes. First, when the disciples see Jesus, they worship him. Second, Jesus says these words: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." And third, he sends them out to the nations, to the gentiles, to all the other people in the world, to make disciples of them and teach them to observe and keep his teachings. Our reading this morning, at the beginning of Matthew, begins by telling us that this was the "time of Herod the king." That's how we name our periods of history, isn't it? We call the late 70s the Carter years, and the 80s the Regan era. The whole second half of the 19th century is the Victorian Period in England and beyond. Who is in charge? Who has the authority? The President. The Queen. And here at the beginning of Matthew, it's King Herod. That's why the wise men come to him. They head to the obvious place one would look to find a newborn king: in the palace of the current king. So we start the Gospel with the authority belonging to Herod, and we end it with authority belonging to Jesus. But the wise men already seem to know where the real authority is to be found when they go to pay Jesus homage. And you need to know

that the word here for paying homage is the same word that's used for the disciples worshipping Jesus at the end, and it's used three times in our short reading. And that's just a bit ironic, isn't it? Jesus' own people, the descendants of Israel, are mystified and frightened, but here are these Gentiles, worshipping and bringing their treasures to the one with real authority. It reminds me of the very beginning of the book of Isaiah, where God says this: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know…" I've been thinking about that, because it's the reason we have an ox and a donkey in our manger scenes, to continue that theme. They're not in Luke's story, but they are in Isaiah, and I actually love that they are now a fixture in our manger scenes. Anyway, back to Matthew. At the beginning the Gentiles come to Jesus. At the end, the disciples go to the Gentiles, to make more disciples and to teach them to obey the real authority.

That brings us to the second thing to notice in this reading, that it is setting up a contrast between the current authorities and the true authority. Matthew's Gospel is an ongoing battle between those who have taken authority upon themselves, Herod the brutal king and the religious authorities who will collaborate with the next Herod, and Jesus, the one to whom real authority belongs. And the contrast could not be more stark. The story that comes next after our reading is the one where Herod orders all of the male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger to be slaughtered because he is terrified of losing his power. This Herod, and all the Herods of the world, past, present, and future, rule by fear, and are in turn ruled by it. Take the current president of Russia as an example, known for assassinating anyone he sees as a threat to his power, and also known for being paranoid about the possibility of his own assassination, who his sending his own young men to slaughter and be slaughtered. That's how Herods role, by reacting, by lashing out at their enemies. Jesus by contrast, tells his followers to put away their swords when he is arrested, and goes willingly to his own unjust execution at the hands of the Roman Herods and their collaborators.

The third and final thing to notice is how the wise men relate to Herod and Jesus. At first, as I already noted, they go to the obvious place to find the king they seek. But then they listen to those who know about things they don't know about – the prophesies of where the king should really be expected. That's what wise people do. They are willing to have their assumptions challenged. They listen and they learn. And not only do they listen to the scribes, they listen to the angel, who warns them about Herod, not to go back to him, not to listen to him and believe his lies about pretending to worship Jesus. And they change their way. Literally. They return to their homes following a different road, and a different way.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the wise men's challenge is every bit our challenge today: to recognize where true authority over heaven and earth really lies, to notice the contrast between how the rulers of this world rule and how the one we continue to celebrate today as the newborn king rules, and then to listen to the voice that calls us to follow a different way, the voice of the one who endures the horror inflicted on the world by the powers of sin, death, and evil, and who emerges victorious over those powers and sends his disciples to spread the news and the promise of the new and different way. And this is the promise that ends Matthew's Gospel: The rulers of this world come and go. The Herod who slaughtered the children of Bethlehem, was not the same Herod who collaborated in slaughtering Jesus, but the old boss is always the same as the new boss. But the one who refuses to rule by fear and violence, but bears their collateral damage for us and for our salvation, blazes a path through death and hell to a different and better way, and that one promises to be with us always, to the end of the age. May we trust that promise, dear people, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.