

Festival of Epiphany  
January 5, 2003  
Psalm 72

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

**The Magi Were Right About King Jesus**

1. He's a King like no other
2. He's the King of all the world

***NIV Psalm 72:1 Of Solomon. Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. 2 He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. 3 The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. 4 He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. 5 He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. 6 He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. 7 In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. 8 He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. 9 The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. 10 The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. 11 All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. 12 For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. 13 He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. 14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. 15 Long may he live! May gold from Sheba be given him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all day long. 16 Let grain abound throughout the land; on the tops of the hills may it sway. Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon; let it thrive like the grass of the field. 17 May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed.***

Fellow Subjects of King Jesus,

The Gospel for the Festival of Epiphany shows that the Wise Men had an insight into the identity of the infant Jesus that few other people in that day possessed. They traveled a great distance at great expense, so that they could come to worship Jesus and present him with their offerings. And then, when they'd done that, they returned to their own country. I try to imagine a scenario in which I would go that far and to such expense to see a baby—even a royal baby—and I have to conclude that I would undertake such a trip only if I were convinced that the baby in question was an extremely special child.

Their trip to Bethlehem from the east was certainly not a case of friends stopping over to see the new baby. And what they found when they got to Jerusalem must have been very confusing to them. Jerusalem's citizens seemed to be ignorant of the birth of the King. Even King Herod considered their inquiry an unpleasant surprise. That right there might have been almost enough to make the Magi wonder whether they had misread the message in the sky. But after the convening of the Jewish religious authorities, the star the Wise Men had seen in the east reappeared and went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. That place was surely not what they expected either. There was no phalanx of courtiers, no battery of attendants, nurses, and physicians. There was no giveaway halo marking the baby as the Holy One of God. There was just a lowly woman and her lowly child. Yet the Wise Men were undeterred. **"They bowed down and worshiped (the child). And "They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."** (Matt. 2:11)

Psalm 72, the psalm for the Festival of Epiphany, shows us that the Magi were right. They were right to travel so far, right to bow down before the child Jesus and worship him and right to present him with gifts fit for a king. Psalm 72 is a Messianic psalm, that is, what it speaks about here is not King Solomon or his father, King David, but about the manger-born King of Kings, Jesus Christ. As we examine the message of this psalm, we see that **The Magi Were Right About King Jesus**. Jesus is 1] a King like no other, and 2] he's the King of all the world.

### **1. He's a King like no other**

Psalm 72 begins, *"Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice."* This is written under a heading which identifies this as a psalm of Solomon, so at first glance we might think Solomon is praying for God's blessings on his own reign. Solomon was, after all, a royal son. He was the son of King David. He was also widely renowned for his justice and righteousness. It was Solomon who made that fabled decision to call for a sword and propose dividing a baby in two when two women both claimed the child was theirs and that the child accidentally smothered belonged to the other woman. The Bible says after that decision that the people of Israel **"held (Solomon) in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice."** (1 Kgs. 3:28) And that wasn't just a local attitude; people of other nations had the same reaction to Solomon. The Queen of Sheba was awed, too. It seems to fit.

Yet, for all that, Solomon was in many ways just another monarch. The prophet Samuel warned the Israelites when they were asking for a king that a king would exact a heavy toll from them. He'd draft their sons to serve in his army and their daughters to serve in his palace. He'd exact a tithe from them to support his regal style of living. Solomon did all that and more. After Solomon died, the people of Israel pleaded with his son, Rehoboam, to lighten the yoke that

Solomon had placed on them. More than that, for all the promise Solomon showed early on, he turned out to be a disappointment as king. This wisest of all men eventually let his foreign wives lead him into idolatry. The Bible says, “**His heart had turned away from the LORD.**” (1 Kgs. 11:9) It’s pretty hard to view a king as an exemplar of justice and righteousness when he’s bowing down before idols.

No, Psalm 72 is speaking of a king like no other. When it says, “*He will judge your people in righteousness and your afflicted ones with justice,*” ask yourself, “Where have I heard that before?” You heard it in Isaiah 9: “**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.**” Not only is this famous Isaiah 9 passage a description of King Jesus, but so is Psalm 72. Not Solomon but Jesus is the King who, as it says here, “*will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor.*”

This comes as good news for us. It means that this psalm is not just an antiquated song of praise to a long-gone king; it’s a description of the King who lives today and forever and reigns over us by his grace through his gospel. We were the afflicted, the needy and the oppressed. We were afflicted by Satan. We were in need of a Savior. And we were oppressed by our sins and the knowledge of the punishment our sins deserve. Justice and righteousness weren’t very comforting concepts to sinners like us. Righteousness? Why, that’s what God is and what he wants us to be. But we aren’t righteous. Justice just means that God ought to punish us because we’ve failed to achieve his standard of righteousness. But then we think of that name that the prophet Jeremiah bestowed on Jesus: The LORD our Righteousness. Jesus and Jesus alone led a righteous life. He was not born in sin and he did not live in sin. Yet in his great love for us he took that righteous life of his to the cross where God’s justice meted out against him the punishment we deserved. King Jesus stood under God’s anger and condemnation for us and, as he did, he crushed the oppressor and defended the afflicted. Jesus is a King like no other.

Another clue that this psalm is speaking of Jesus and not Solomon is when it says, “*He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.*” King Solomon reigned in Jerusalem for forty years, from 970 to 930 B.C. Four decades is a long time to reign, but it’s a far cry from enduring as long as the sun or the moon. Nor is the psalm simply engaging in a bit of poetic exaggeration. The LORD truly did promise David that he would have a descendant whose kingdom would last forever. And when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce that she would be the mother of our Savior, he had this promise in mind. Gabriel, you’ll recall, told Mary, “**The Lord God will**

**give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-33)**

This means, then, that this psalm isn't just a bit of ancient history, a look backward at the long and storied four-decade reign of King Solomon, but a reminder that the King we serve lives and reigns forever. And the kingdom of which we became members when we came to faith in Jesus is a kingdom that never ends. It says of King Jesus in the Bible that “in everything” he has the “supremacy.” He knows no equal. He has no true rival. Every enemy must go down to defeat before him. The heavens and the earth may wear out like a garment, but he remains the same and his years never end. What a wonderful assurance this is! We don't have to worry that we'll wake up one day and a new king has arisen who doesn't remember us or his promises to us. His throne lasts forever. (Heb. 1:8) The Wise Men had it right. Jesus is a King like no other. His justice and his righteousness know no equal, and his kingdom will endure forever. For all these reasons, we join the Wise Men in bending the knee before Jesus and offering him our worship.

One feature of Psalm 72 is that it speaks extensively about the qualities of the Messiah's kingdom: its justice and righteousness, and that it will endure forever. But another thing that you notice about this psalm is that it speaks at length also about the extent of the Messiah's kingdom. Here it is prophesied that the Messiah is King of all the world.

## **2. He's the King of all the world**

It says here, *He will rule from sea to sea and from the River (the Euphrates) to the ends of the earth.*” It says later, *“The kings of Tarshish (probably on the coast of Spain) and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba (modern Yemen) and Seba (Sudan) will present him gifts.”* Now there's little doubt that during the time of King Solomon the borders of Israel were pushed out past what they'd ever been before and would ever be again. Solomon's era was Israel's Golden Age. When Solomon was king, Israel actually had merchant ships that may have gone as far as Arabia, east Africa, and the coast of India and they brought exotic things like ivory and baboons back to Jerusalem. Yet, for all that, even the most optimistic assessments of Solomon's sphere of influence don't imply that he controlled all the then-known world. The fact is that Solomon had as close as neighboring Syria a thorn-in-the-flesh opponent he could never quite put down. We'll have to look elsewhere to find the king of all the world.

Zechariah 9 might be a good place to start. Zechariah speaks there of a king who **“will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”** Sounds familiar, doesn't it? These are almost word for word the words of Psalm 72, but in Zechariah 9 they come after the the prophecy of a king who is **“righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey.”** (Zech. 9:9) This king is Jesus. The Wise Men

from the east were only some of the early representatives of a kingdom that would one day extend to the ends of the earth.

This is something else that the Wise Men had right. We might wonder why we should spend our precious Sunday morning hour examining a page from a 3000-year-old Jewish hymnbook. What could it possibly have to say to us, so many years later and so many miles away? But the Wise Men realized that, though they were looking for the King of the Jews, this was their King, too. News of his birth doesn't belong just in the local section; this is world news. As it says later in Psalm 72, "*All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed.*"

The season of Epiphany is a time for remembering with gratitude that King Jesus is not just the King of the Jews, but our King, too. Because it was the Lord's gracious plan to lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes of his tent, we Gentiles too have been brought into God's kingdom through faith in Jesus. We're so accustomed to hearing this message, that it might almost surprise us to hear that there was some debate in the early church about whether the gospel of Jesus ought to be shared with non-Jews. But God made it clear that it was his will. Jesus spoke of other sheep who would listen to his voice, so that there would be one flock and one shepherd. He commissioned Paul as his missionary to the Gentiles. And that explains why we're here, members of Christ's church, heirs—together with Jewish believers—of a full measure of the grace and mercy of God.

But it doesn't stop there. Epiphany is also a time to remember that there are others still to be brought into this flock. We're here, surrounded by God's grace, because somewhere in the past someone was moved to go beyond the existing geographical and cultural boundaries, because someone was moved to climb over the language barrier and share with our ancestors the wonders of God's mercy. There are still many places where that must be done today. Some of these places are in Africa, in Indonesia, in Japan and Mexico. Some of these places are in our own state, even in our own community. But today, for the first time in my memory, it seems that our church body may be retreating rather than advancing in the work of missions. We can, I suppose, shrug and say, "So be it." Who could have predicted the September 11 attacks and the effect they had on the foundation that was so generously funding a good share of our synod's mission outreach? But I think a better response would be for the 300,000+ communicants of the WELS to step forward and fill the breach that was created when our country was attacked. I believe that the current financial crisis in our synod is affording each congregation in the WELS and each of us individually an opportunity to assess our response to the good news of Psalm 72, that Jesus Christ is the King in whom all nations will be blessed.

The Wise Men did have it right. Rather than responding to the message in the sky with, "A King of the Jews? So what?" they got up and came to Judea to see this King. They were not deterred by the fact that no one in Jerusalem seemed

to know what they were talking about. They were not even deterred by the fact that the child they found seemed to be a poster child for poverty rather than a royal offspring. They bowed and they offered him their costliest and their best, because this was a King like no other, the King of all the world. He's our King, too. Amen.