

✧ *In the Name of Jesus* ✧

Some people are especially gifted in showing hospitality. A few years ago I showed up at someone's door unannounced. I had never met anyone who lived there, but they knew the church I was serving. And because I was from that church, I was welcome in that home. The person was very busy. And yet she stopped what she was doing, made tea, put some goodies on a plate, and expected me to sit down for some refreshment. When it was time to go, she sent me home with a small gift. | Thinking about her reminds me of the many choir tours I went on as a student in your training schools which prepare young people for full time work in the church. Our choirs would travel across the country visiting WELS congregations. Your fellow members in our sister churches pulled out all the stops to make us feel welcome in their homes. Some people are especially gifted in showing hospitality.

I hope you have been made to feel just as welcome at least once in your life. 'Welcome' is one of the exciting things about Epiphany. During the Epiphany season our Scripture lessons make clear that God is holding the door to his heavenly home open for all sinners, welcoming us in. Think of that! We are not supposed to get into heaven. Not when we push aside God's Word in favor of other interests, or when we insist on feeling guilty after God has declared us innocent in Christ. That breaks the first commandment. We aren't supposed to get into heaven. Not when we won't communicate with those who have

wronged or irritated us, or those whom we have wronged. That breaks the commandment to love others as God has loved us (Ephesians 4:32). We aren't supposed to get into heaven. Not when we won't work at finding a nice way to express our feelings to those who irritate or bother us as the eighth commandment requires. * Yet God does not want even one sinner to perish. That's why he sent Jesus to be our Savior. Epiphany is God's way of saying with excitement, "Come, all you wretched sinners! You are welcome in my house because I have declared you clean in Jesus!"

The Magi got the message (Matthew 2:1-12). That's why they traveled a great distance to honor Jesus. These wisemen didn't wait until Jesus had died on the cross and risen from the dead to come worship him. They came at the time of his birth, before he had actively done even one thing toward saving us. Why is important that they visited when Jesus was no older than a toddler? It shows that the door to God's heavenly home was open to Gentiles through faith long before Jesus told his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). How exciting! God always wanted everyone to be saved!

We heard how excited Isaiah was about 'God's Epiphany attitude' in today's Old Testament Lesson. Isaiah foresees scads and scads of Gentiles coming to Jesus as believers. How does he know they are believers? Well, first, because they are coming to God's people as part of the family ("*your sons, your daughters,*" Isaiah 60:4). And second, because they are bringing offerings for the Lord.

Offerings? Already? Wow! It often takes a long time before people grow in faith to the point where they bring generous offerings. People will fork over hundreds of dollars for electronic equipment, or thousands for vehicles, or tens of thousands for investments where they expect all the money back with an increase. But you, you regularly turn over a generous percentage of your income to the Lord for the teaching of the Good News about Jesus to others! Your offerings are evidence of your faith. The number of dollars out of every hundred that you joyfully give back to God may even measure your faith. That's one reason why such things are best known only between you and the Lord. But when you bring an offering to the Lord, your fellow believers are encouraged by your action, and they praise God for working his love in your heart. Isaiah is ecstatic to see Gentiles streaming to worship the Lord with their praises and their offerings.

Did you notice that Isaiah mentioned Sheba. “*And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD*” (Isaiah 60:6b). Did you make the connection with our sermon text?

¹*When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions.* You know who Solomon is, right? He was the third king of Israel. He asked for wisdom to govern God's people well, so God made him very wise, not to mention wealthy. He wrote a couple of the Psalms and most of the

Proverbs in our Bible, plus the books Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. In fact, it's because of Solomon's connection to the Lord, that the queen wanted to visit him.

But who is this queen of Sheba? We don't know much about her. The Ethiopian Christians claim her as one of their queens. (Josephus agrees.) But I'm more inclined to believe she ruled over an area of the Arabian peninsula today called Yemen. Solomon's fleet of ships had sailed far to conduct business. His sailors spoke of his greatness. This incredulous queen came to see for herself whether any of it was true. After all, people tend to exaggerate about how good someone is. “Well, let's go check him out.” Easier said than done. We think the queen traveled about 1500 miles by camel. The queen would have to be protected, so a division of her army came along. They all had to be fed. Plus there was all the gifts she brought.

²*Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones... Spices, gold, and precious stones (?from India or East Africa) were probably rare in Israel and therefore quite valuable—a great way to capture a king's attention and curry his favor.*

What else can we know about the queen? Let's assume she practiced some other religion and didn't yet believe in the one true God. Yet if she was polytheistic, she had room in her mind for one more powerful god. And Israel's God was widely known for what he had done in

Egypt and in Canaan to acquire the promised land for Israel. The queen of Sheba apparently believed that much of Solomon's greatness came from his connection to Yahweh, the God of Israel. "This must be tested," I imagine her saying to herself. "Let's see if his wisdom is great." She assembled all the enigmas and riddles she could think of. I imagine that kings and officials enjoyed matching wits back then as much as people do today, like when the modern press tests presidential candidates on foreign policy.

But the queen had more than riddles for the king. ²*She came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind.* It seems she shared the burdens and secrets of her heart with him! She trusted him. It seems likely that the queen also wanted a trade deal with him. As king of Israel, Solomon controlled the major land routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Sheba had to engage in trading to supplement their rather advanced agriculture. If the queen didn't join with Solomon, her country might be squeezed out by his (*New Bible dictionary*, InterVarsity Press, 1088).

³*Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.* Of course not. The Lord had promised to give him such a wise and discerning heart that there would never be anyone like him (1 Kings 3:12).

⁴*When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, which took only 13 years to build...*

When she saw ⁵*the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers...* Talk about dinner theater! She was amazed as she watched Solomon's hundreds of servants gathered about the bountiful tables and the fancy clothes of Solomon's personal attendants. But when she saw *the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD...* The Hebrew here is a little vague for our modern understanding. It could refer to the burnt offerings Solomon made in an orderly way, which were actually prescribed by God, but still impressive. The Hebrew could also refer to the private entrance Solomon had leading up into the temple. Either way, Solomon really did have a strong connection to the Lord and his house. He agreed with the Lord that religion should be practiced in an organized way.

When the queen saw all this, she was overwhelmed. Literally the Hebrew says "there was no breath in her"—it took her breath away. When she could talk again, ⁶*She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. ⁷But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard."* This, by the way, is probably the reason that the Holy Spirit caused this portion of 1 Kings to be written. We aren't really being introduced to the queen. Her name isn't even given. No, this wealthy queen appears on the pages of Scripture to help us understand just how

great the Lord made Solomon to be. The queen told Solomon, “⁸*How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!* “Happy” is only part of the meaning. The Hebrew word is usually translated “blessed” in our Bible. But if you’re blessed by God, you get to taste real happiness. “How blessed your officials must be who get to hear your wisdom!” Ah, there’s a lesson for us to take to heart. Wisdom comes from God. He reveals it in the Bible. How blessed **you** are when you resolve to come near to God in his Word so you can learn his wisdom. Pour some of God’s Word into your heart every day. You too will be blessed and happy like the queen talks about. In fact, by reading the Bible yourself, you’ll be getting your wisdom from Someone who is even greater than Solomon.

The queen also said, ⁹*“Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness.”* That’s what God does. He puts people into our lives to bless us. I don’t know whether you like our current president or not. But our Lord put President Trump over us to maintain justice and righteousness. And to the extent that he and the rest of our government officials do this, so much can we see the love of the Lord for us and this nation. Our elected leaders are a blessing to us. We are right to give God the glory for anything good our government does for us.

But getting back to the queen of Sheba, do you think she believed in the one true God? I would like to think so, but then I want everyone to be saved through faith in the one true God. God certainly wanted her to trust in him and so be saved. Listen to what Jesus said about her when he was castigating the people of his day for not listening to him. *The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here* (Matthew 12:42). When you want to hear God’s wisdom..., when you praise the Lord for making someone else wise in his ways..., when you believe it’s wrong for people not to listen to Jesus, that sounds like fruits of faith. Although we can’t see faith, we can see fruits of faith. So I maintain, **EVEN THE QUEEN OF SHEBA BELIEVED.**

Well, aren’t you just another queen of Sheba? You left your home and traveled a distance to be in God’s house today, to hear his Word, to absorb his wisdom, to praise his name. Sounds like fruits of faith to me. Even you believed! It’s an Epiphany miracle—Gentiles worshiping Jesus! | If you are not much like the queen of Sheba, it’s a new year. Now’s a good time to follow her example. If she was willing take such great pains to verify the reports of Solomon’s wisdom and wealth, might we be even more willing to explore the spiritual wisdom and wealth that the Bible claims to offer?