

Sermon Epiphany 2018

January 7, 2018

Matthew 2:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The lesson for our meditation this morning is the Gospel reading from Matthew Chapter 2. Amen.

God doesn't work like we think He should. We have our expectations for Him, we have our thoughts about how He should do things, but He doesn't work like that. He proves again and again that He is God and we are not.

We see this all over the Gospel lesson this week. To start, we see this in the Magi themselves. Now as we heard in the Old Testament lesson, it was promised that the Messiah would be born. It was promised of this Messiah, **"the nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."** It was said of Him, **"A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord."** However, the people didn't see it this way. Here the Jews, God's own people had His very word which described how the nations would come to Him, how the Messiah would bring salvation, not only for this chosen race, but for all nations. They had God's Word proclaimed to them time and time again describing such things, and yet when push came to shove they didn't expect that this would be the case. They thought God's salvific Messiah would come to rescue them and them alone. But God doesn't work like we think He should.

In fact, what we see in the Gospel Lesson for this morning is that these Magi, these wise men as we often call them, waited with anticipation for this King to come. They were looking for Him. They were watching for God to call them to Him. Now, we presume that this was likely because the Hebrew Scriptures had been carried into the East, in Babylon during the captivity, but we don't know for sure. In any case, these magi were waiting and observing. Yet what happened when they came to the appointed king of the Judeans? He didn't know about this. Instead, he had to ask about it. He had to call in the experts and see what they said.

Of course, they got the answer right. They knew the prophecy from Micah— **"you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel"**—but isn't there something significant in this? Where are they? They are in Jerusalem. They know that

the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, they know that that is the place to be looking for Him, and yet where are they? They are in their cushy accommodations in Jerusalem. We have to wonder if when the magi came, if those priests and scribes sent anyone to investigate. After all, that would be appropriate, wouldn't it? It would be akin to when someone who isn't Christian humbles us in being loving where we aren't, forgiving when we should be, more willing to serve others when we should be willing to serve. In those cases there's nothing wrong with being provoked toward faithfulness by those who don't believe. But we don't get the impression that these leaders of the Jews did this. It doesn't look like they heeded the words of Lord and came to worship their true King. But God doesn't work like we think He should.

As we think of this, we also see that Herod, likewise, didn't go to worship Jesus. He didn't even come close to humbling himself, which shows where his devotion really was. He was not the true king of these people at all. He was an imposter. He had the appearances that one would expect a king to have. He had the accoutrements: the palace; the crown; the robes; the lifestyle; but he wasn't the true king. Instead the true king had been born in a barn. He had been laid in a manger, a feeding trough, and He had been wrapped in common swaddling cloths. This One by no means looked like a King. But He was, as was demonstrated by the gifts given to Him by the Magi—**“gold and frankincense and myrrh.”** But God doesn't work like we think He should.

As I say that, let's put all of this into quick summary—you have non-Jewish Wise Men coming to worship the Jewish King, not in the palace but in the house. The King not dressed in fancy clothes but in the trappings of a common and lowly man. All the while the Jews overlook just what has happened. It's not how you would think this would happen.

In fact, think about this in addition to everything: here the Savior of the whole world has entered into creation. He has come into this world with the proclamation of Peace on Earth and Good will toward men, right? With this announcement you would expect a lack of conflict, wouldn't you? You wouldn't expect trial, you wouldn't expect struggles and hostility, but what happens? Right after Herod investigates all of this, what does he do? It's not in the reading for this morning, but I'm guess a lot you remember it. Do you remember what happens after this? Herod sends his troops in and they slaughter all of the boys in Bethlehem two and under. That's not what we expect, is it? That's not the peace that was promised, is it?

Now of course, we have to acknowledge that the Devil has a hand in this. We have to acknowledge that the Devil, with his dominion over this world wreaks havoc on things here, but when we hear, **“Glory to God in the Highest and peace to His people on earth,”** when we hear, **“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him,”** we don’t expect for conflict, and opposition, and slaughter, do we? Because while we acknowledge that the Devil causes this, we also can’t deny that God is omnipotent, that God can stop it, but for some reason doesn’t. We have to acknowledge that this doesn’t make sense to us, that we expect God to stop every evil and wonder why He doesn’t. We expect Him to right every wrong now, and question Him when these things continue. In short, we have to confess that God doesn’t work like we think He should.

In fact, I think there’s nothing more evident of this than what we have just endured this week. As we mourn the loss of one of our own, of Weston Fuller, we have to say that God doesn’t work like we think He should. We don’t expect that God will call 26 year olds home. We don’t expect that He will take from us our young men, our children, the ones who should be the strongest and least in danger of succumbing to the loss of life. And then we are confronted by these things. Then we are confronted right in our face, right where we can’t deny it, that God doesn’t work like we think He should.

But Christians, even when it is hard, we have to know that this is a good thing. We have to know and cling to the promise that this is good, that God is good, that God really does have our best interest in mind as these things happen.

And we see this most of all in the cross. I think I’ve mentioned this before but think about the cross. Think about what happened when our Lord Jesus was nailed to the tree, to the instrument of death for the Roman Empire. Think about that. There was the Perfect Man, the only Human Being who had never sinned, never done anything wrong. The only One who had loved God with all of His heart, soul, mind, and strength, and His neighbor as Himself, the only One who had done this perfectly. There He was hanged on this tree, cursed like a criminal, being executed like we would execute a vicious murderer in our day. There He was in this spot. And is this what we would expect for the God through whom the whole universe was created? Is this what we would expect for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? That He would submit to death at the hands of angry sinners? No!

In fact, is there any worse thing we can think of? That the Holy God would come to dwell in man and die this most ignoble death? Is there anything worse than God

being beaten, spit on and killed? Than God in the flesh dying? We should understand that there isn't. This truly is the worst possible thing that could happen. But God doesn't work like we think He should.

And yet, look at the result. Here was the worst thing possible, and what did God do with it? He worked the best possible thing, didn't He? Out of this horrible and wretched situation, God worked the salvation of mankind and the redemption of this whole creation. You see this is why the angels sang. This is why peace was proclaimed, this is why the birth was so anticipated even by the Gentiles. It was this birth that was the culmination of all time. And in this, God used the worst possible thing to work the best possible thing. So to say that least God doesn't work like we think He should.

In fact, look at our faith, look at how God works our faith in Him. Would we expect that water poured on our foreheads with the speaking of God's Word would actually bring the Holy Spirit into our hearts and bury us in Jesus' death, raising us in His resurrection? Would we expect that the bread and wine we eat at this rail would actually strengthen our faith and sustain us in our life with Him because it is also the body and blood of Jesus? Would we expect that as we hear sermons week in and week out, most often ones that don't strike us as particularly exciting would be the meals that feed our souls to continue in faith in Jesus, like tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich? And would we expect that when we sit down and read the Bible that even when those words hardly make sense to us, God actually uses that to draw us to Himself and keep us in His blessed arms, even when our world falls apart around us? None of this makes sense, but He promises all of this to us.

So, yes it's true, God does not work like we think He should. But Christians as we take a step back and we look at what He does, so often we can then see the forest where we had only seen trees before. These things don't make sense to us often, but He really does know what He's doing. He really does know how to accomplish what is best for His good and our good. He really does know how to prove that He is God, and the God who is love. And Christians, as we celebrate Epiphany today—Epiphany which means manifestation, manifestation of God in the flesh of Jesus—we see, yes God doesn't work like we think He should. But He works the way that He knows will be best for our salvation. And that truly is the greatest work He could do. Thanks be to God. Amen.