

Sermon Epiphany 2021

January 10, 2021

Matthew 2:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

The story is one that we hear annually. We even have the yearly reminder of it in our Nativity Sets: the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child. On the one hand we know it like the back of our hands. On the other, if you're like me, things strike you as unnoticed in it periodically. For example, I remember being relatively old when I realized that these wise men didn't visit Jesus at the manger in Bethlehem. In fact, the lesson doesn't specifically say that Jesus was still in Bethlehem. I think he probably was, but if you watched my devotion on it this week, you heard me say that the author I read about this said that he believed Joseph and Mary had returned to Nazareth and the star led the Magi there. But whether in Bethlehem or Nazareth, the thing that makes this the most surprising is that the visit is apparently two years or after our Lord's birth. If you hadn't heard or remembered that, you can see it from the section we had last week where Herod slaughtered all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old and under. And why? Because that was according to the time he had ascertained from the Magi.

As I say this, though, you might be wondering why I'm spending this time talking about such intricate details. Does it matter that it was two years after Christ's birth when the Magi came? Well, on the one hand you won't be damned just for falling into the assumption that this visit is at the manger. But what duty do we have to knowing God's Word? We all have that duty to know it and have it inwardly digested. Sure, as a pastor it's my job to know it and study daily for my work, but for all Christians, we should know it. We should also believe it.

Now, as I say that, you might be thinking that's obvious. And of course it is. But we've got a great warning in this reading reminding us of that truth, and of how easy it is either to not know it, or not to believe it. What is that? Look at the details here. When Herod heard that the King was born, what did he do? He assembled **"all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born."** And what did they say? "Oh well, we don't know." No! They knew exactly what it said. They got it right. They said that the child would be born in Bethlehem. They even knew where it said so. **"For so it is written by the prophet, 'And 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.'"** They knew that the Prophet had said this—which by the way this is mostly from Micah 5:2, although the language at the end about

shepherding is from 2 Kings 5. But they knew that the prophet Micah had said it. And why's that important? What can we take from that?

Well think about where they were and where they weren't. You have these Biblical Scholars who know their stuff, but when push came to shove—when the Messiah was actually born in Bethlehem—where were they? They were in Jerusalem, not worshipping the child. And when these Magi came, where was the King of the Jews? Seeking ways to destroy the child.

How do we learn from that? Well, first of all, we need to make sure we know that word, because we see that even when you know it, it's hard to properly cling to it. But that's the other part, to make sure we cling to it. To make sure we don't get distracted by the worldly things, by the comforts of palaces or what we feel to be safe. To make sure we don't get our focus shifted from the heart of that Word to other concerns. It's so easy to do.

I mentioned those Biblical Scholars knowing that Word, and not taking it to heart, and we can make the clear connection to Academia today. I don't think I really had that with my professors in seminary. I think they were deeply convicted by the Word, but you see in the Academic world many who know the Bible inside and out, who teach about what it says, and yet they devalue that word constantly and undermine the truth revealed in it.

For us, we need to make sure that doesn't happen as well. We need to make sure that we cling to this Word and its truth. However, I think we need to also make sure that we don't become self-righteous about how much we believe the Bible and use that as an excuse to rest on not knowing it inside and out. The Bible is a hard book to understand in many places. That makes it hard to want to read. But the more we read it and seek to understand it, the more we will understand it. And the more deeply it will ground us in our Lord. And the more we will understand its message about our Lord.

And as I say that, that's something else I personally have been struck by these past couple of weeks. I started thinking about this for the devotions on the Escape to Egypt and the return after Herod's death. You look at all that, and the attention that God gives to the details and fulfilling those details is amazing. He fulfills the details that Jesus would be called out of Egypt; **"Out of Egypt I have called my Son."** And then that there would be the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, that Rachael would weep over her sons. Then that Jesus would be called the Nazarene. Detail after detail from the Old Testament fulfilled. And you see it here too. Look at the detail of making sure that Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Look at the detail of making sure that the Magi come to worship him as was promised in the lesson in Isaiah. And the detail that they would bring Gold and

Frankincense. This detail foretold hundreds of years in advance, yet fulfilled. God's attention to it.

It was interesting, here I was already meditating on this and I heard a friend of mine preach on the Epiphany last week. What did He focus on? He spoke of what the theologians of old called it: Providence. He said look at how you see God's providence in all of this. Look at how you see Him working all of this. I often say that God is playing chess while we're playing checkers. And that doesn't even suffice to describe it. He's doing thermonuclear equations while we're unable to count with our fingers.

Look at how that plays itself out even in the story here, or in the whole birth. You've got Joseph looking to divorce Mary right away, and God reorders that. You've got the Magi going to the wrong place, and the Lord redirects them to the Son. You've got Herod looking to kill this threat to his power, and the Lord moves the Magi to go back another way. God's three steps ahead of man in all of it.

And I think we need to look at the world around us in the same sense. Look at the two things we're most up in arms about: politics and the coronavirus. We're worried about how things will shake out with race relations or with elections, or the storming of the capitol this week. Do you think God doesn't have it all in hand? Or the coronavirus. We've got the vaccine being distributed and now the virus is changing to spread that much faster. Do we think that if God intends for a certain number to get sick, or even to die with that as the cause it won't happen?

And of course, I know I'm touching on some very challenging ground in the faith and the mysteries of that faith, but it's true. God rules over all things and has them working for His good. Does it mean that we don't try to take care not to get our neighbor sick? Of course not! We still try to honor care with things like social distancing, even here in the church. Do we not hope that vaccines can be created? Of course it's OK to hope for that, to hope for the virus to end. Do we still vote, do we still repent of racism and seek reconciliation and care for all peoples? Of course we do! But we understand with David a couple of weeks ago that sometimes pious desires of men don't fit into God's mysterious plans for the world. And what I'm referring to, if you recall, was David saying to Nathan the prophet that he would build the temple for God.

Do you remember that reading? David said he was going to do that, and what did Nathan hear as a word from the Lord? "Did I tell anyone I was upset I didn't have a house? No. Tell David that he won't build me a house, I will build him one."

Yes, God has it all in His hands! So why do we rail against it? Why do we seek to push against His rule and trust Him? Why do we not seek instead to know Him and His

will? Obviously, as always the answer is sin, but look at what it does to us. Look at how it ultimately draws us to fear and despair.

Christians, we rail against it because we think we know better, but how could we know better? We weren't there when He created the world, just like He said to Job. I don't know if you remember all of that. Job went through his whole story and his whole life was toppled end over end. And God said that Job didn't do anything to deserve it in particular, but the He is God and Job wasn't. He reminded Job that His wisdom was above Job's, He was there at the formation of the world, Job wasn't. How true for us too! And that's good. It's especially something we realize is good when we see who this God is. It's especially good when we see what this Providence works.

After all, I've been talking about how God is doing all these things way above us; how He was working this over and against Joseph, and that over and against Herod. And look at what all of the attention to detail was centered on. What was the point of all of it? That there would be this Jesus who saved mankind. God was working all of this to the salvation of the world.

You know that's something that always strikes me this time of year. We don't latch onto it much, but the whole New Testament makes the point that this salvation of Jesus is about the whole world. It was promised to the Jews, but given for the whole world. That's how much God wanted salvation to be brought. That's how much He wanted salvation to occur. It's so much a part of His heart, His very being that He wanted to work that salvation, that forgiveness of sins. And He wanted to work it even for those who deserved it least. He wanted to work it for sinners like us.

And He has. Look at how this providence has worked for your benefit. He has worked that providence that you would be brought to the waters of baptism and cleansed under His gracious flood. He has worked His providence that you would be brought to hear His blessed Gospel. He has worked His providence that He would place that salvation upon your tongue in the body and blood of Jesus.

Christians, as we hear this lesson we hear year in and year out, don't miss that. Those High Priests and Scribes are the warning for us. May we not ignore that Word. We deserve to miss it, but may God keep us in that Word. Why? Because in that Word this God revered by the Magi reveals Himself. He reveals Himself as having all things in His hand. And they are in His Hand for our good, for our salvation; for salvation in His love and His care for us. That stands now amidst political division, amidst pandemics, and even against our own sin. Because He has loved us and worked all things for our good eternally. Amen.