

Matthew 2:1-12 – Epiphany: “Seek God’s Face, not just His Hands” – January 6th/7th, 2018

Grace and peace to you all from God our Father and the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

As I was getting ready to preach on this passage from Matthew 2, I was initially struck by how far these wise men had traveled. If they came from Babylon (and many scholars think they do because it had a strong history of astronomy) then it would have been around 900 miles to get to Jerusalem; Bethlehem was only a couple hour walk south from Jerusalem after that. This journey would take at least 4 months of constant traveling on donkey or camel or by foot. By car that would take us around 14-15 hours (on the highway!). It'd be like walking from Escanaba to Memphis, Tennessee. If they had traveled from Arabia, their journey could have been even longer. I say Arabia because that's where much gold was mined, and where frankincense and myrrh was harvested. Wherever they were from, Babylon or Arabia, they traveled a long, long way. But why? Why did they leave? Why did they leave their plush homes, their comfortable lives to go on a long, difficult journey? Why did they risk robbers and bandits, deserts and unpredictable weather sweeping across the steppes plains? To follow a star? To see a king? Imagine what their wives would have said: “You’re going how far away from home and you’ll be gone for how long and you’re going to see who?” Whatever their wives said to stop them, it didn’t work. Not like that ever happens... These wise men, these magi follow a miraculous star which appears and brings them to Jerusalem. Then it disappears and reappears again to point them exactly to where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were living at the time in Bethlehem. But that appearing and vanishing star is a small miracle for God. The big miracle was this: These wise men, these magi were led by God to the Messiah, to the Savior, to the King of the Jews, to Jesus. *They followed a miraculous star to see the very face of God.* Jesus is the miracle of miracles. The God who told Moses to hide his face from His holy, glorious, frightening presence lest Moses

see Him and die (Exodus 33:23) is the same God, the only God, who summoned these wise men, these magi from somewhere East of the Jordan River to behold with their own eyes, to touch with their own hands, to hear with their own ears God himself, in person, face to face, God clothed in human skin and bone, as a baby or a little child, no older than 2 years. These wise men, these magi got to see to very face of God. That should completely blow us away. We should be blown away at how far they traveled, at what personal cost they made to seek the face of God. We should be completely blown away that they sought to see the very face of God. The same face of God that would sweat drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). The same face of God that would be mockingly covered and spit upon and struck some 30 years later (Matt. 26:67). The same face of God the disciples didn't recognize at first after Jesus appeared to them in his beautiful, resurrected glory (John 20). These wise men, these magi, sought after the face of God.

You might also notice something else about this passage. These wise men, these magi, didn't come to visit King Jesus and the holy family to ask them what they could do for them, like a relative visiting you for Christmas first asking to park in your garage for the week because it's cold outside, then asking for a spare room, a towel, toothpaste because they forgot theirs, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and so on. You'll notice they didn't ask for anything. They had absolutely no requests to make. In fact, the opposite was the case, right? They worshipped Jesus, they gave Jesus and the holy family gifts! In other words, they didn't come to visit King Jesus to see what they could get out of the deal, a *quid pro quo*, a "I scratch your back God and you can scratch mine." No, they didn't ask what Jesus could do for them. They came to see King Jesus just so they could see him, that's it. To see him face to face and behold his glory. Or to use the sermon title, they came to "seek God's Face, not just His Hands."

All too often I think we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that's what faith in Christ is all about, that's what church membership is all about. It's about what God does for me: Answers my prayers, make sure I'm blessed and I'm healthy, and so on. It's about what the Church does for me: The Church exists to fulfill my spiritual needs. Sometimes my needs are huge, like around times of great struggle, like funerals; times like life events, baptism, confirmation, or weddings; or at least spiritual needs seem increase during holiday seasons, especially during Christmas and Easter. If we're using that kind of mode of thinking apparently, people in the U.P., just like Minnesota – sinners are sinners after all no matter where they live – don't have too many spiritual needs in the summer since every single church throughout America dips in worship attendance in the summer months. This is what I would call “consumerist Christianity” or “convenience Christianity.” It's not biblical Christianity. Church, God, Jesus, worship, are looked at as commodities to be consumed when appropriate, when it pleases them, when the need arises. So if someone wants their spiritual fix, they can go to church when and where it pleases them. These are people who are not seeking Christ's face in worship; these are people only looking at his hands, looking for a handout, only concerned about what God, Jesus, the church can do for them, not what they can bring to the Lord, what they can offer to the Lord, how they can support the mission of the church.

Think about this: People drive hours for health care, hours for shopping in Green Bay or Appleton, a little over an hour to Marquette. People drive hours to have fun at an amusement park or a football or baseball game, but how far would you drive, how far would you walk if the closest church was an hour, two hours away? Would you go? Of course, in America we don't have to worry about that because churches dot the landscape – this is certainly a testament to evangelism. But it's also a testament to convenience. And in America culture, we don't like to be

inconvenienced. This is the biggest pet peeve most of us have. I'm just as guilty as the next person and need to be forgiven of this. When we were flying back from Tanzania a couple of years ago, there was a high possibility of missing our connecting flight in Detroit to Escanaba. The only thing I could think of was how awful this would be, spending another night away. I was getting a bit upset at this possibility as we were getting off the plane from Amsterdam and voiced some of those frustrations to a pastor friend of mine. He put me in my place and said: "First world problems." And he's right. I knew that I'd eventually get home; why get so worked up about a little delay? All the wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ we just spent two-weeks with in the sweltering sun and heat, all those Christian people young and old who walked and walked and walked everywhere, especially to church, and not just once a week but 3-4 times a week they went to church, many of them couldn't afford a car, many of them shared bathrooms with family and neighbors, all of them who loved the Lord Jesus. This is what we call "perspective."

This text for Epiphany challenges us to take a deep look at our faith and how we practice our faith in Christ. We are challenged by the wise men, the magi to ask ourselves: How far would we go to see God face to face? God himself comes to us in worship, in the Sacraments, in prayer to indeed give you all He is and all He has – but why do so many stay away from a weekly encounter with God? We look at the wise men, the magi and we can ask ourselves: What will I give to support the King of kings, the Lord of lords, Jesus the Christ? Will I give him all my leftovers, whatever won't cause me to be financially uncomfortable, or will I give Jesus my very best? Will I serve Jesus with my very best? Will I go from worshipping Jesus, just like the wise men did, and talk about the beauty and glory of his holy face? We have been given another year, 2018, in order to do this before Christ comes again. May we not waste this year. Seek his face, not just his hands.

HOD: ELW # 302 "As with Gladness Men of Old"