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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
7 January 2024

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12

Worship Theme:

GOOD NEWS OF FOR ALL PEOPLE

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning "reveal." When the Savior was born, he was first revealed to Israelites: the shepherds, Simeon, Anna. But today, the Lord miraculously guides foreigners across countless miles so that the Savior could be revealed to them as well. And the Magi were overjoyed! Epiphany is sometimes known as "the Gentiles' Christmas." We Gentiles ("non-Jews") also rejoice still today in the good news that this Jewish baby is not just the Savior of Jews. He is a Savior for all people – the Savior of the world!

Sermon Theme: "Seek the One Who Sought You First"

Grace, and mercy, and peace – all these have been freely given to you by God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Did you do it? Did you give in to the societal urge and expectation to make new year's resolutions? Many people do, and of course there's nothing wrong with that. But here we are one week into the new year, and many people who made resolutions have already given up on some or even all of them. We have the best of intentions to work out more, eat healthier, go to bed earlier, read more, spend less time on our phones, be present with our families, and so on. And because you're also a Christian believer and child of God, maybe you did what I did for many years and made a new year's resolution about Jesus – read the Bible more, stay on top of daily devotions, remember to spend time praying (and not just when everything is falling apart!).

So is that why you're here today? It's the first weekend of the new year, first worship opportunity of the year, so we figure we might as well get the year started off right! Maybe 2024 is going to be your year, the year you finally do whatever you've always wanted to do, and a little good luck from Jesus can't hurt that, right? So here you are, seeking him out, hoping that it will make everything happening in your life and in your year just a little bit better.

If that is you, rest assured – you're not alone! For as long as there have been people on earth, we have misunderstood, misused, and misapplied God in our lives. We don't boast about that, and we're certainly not proud of it, but it is part of who we are – every single one of us. And that makes us all broken and lost in a way that no new year's resolution can ever hope to fix. Because of the sinful nature that lives inside us, we're so far removed from God that we will never be able to find him on our own.

Worse yet, our natural response to hearing about God is very similar to King Herod in our reading today. Did you catch it? *When King Herod heard this [i.e. the news about a new-born King of the Jews], he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem*

with him! King Herod heard what should have been wonderful news – a Savior had been born for all the world – but all he could think about was what this “King” would cost him. King Herod didn’t care in the slightest that someone had come to take away the sins of the world, because as far as we can tell from what the Bible says about him, he didn’t seem to care about his sins that much either! At the very least, he didn’t seem to think he needed to be saved from them. So when Jesus entered the scene as God-in-the-flesh, come to save his world from the devastation of sin and hell, all Herod could hear was “a rival King is threatening my land.” Someone who might take my throne away. Someone who might steal the loyalty of my subjects. Someone who might make me change my life and the way I live it!

And maybe now it doesn’t sound all that impossible anymore, does it. We never like to think of ourselves as being similar to “big bad King Herod.” But in some ways, we are. We can all think of times in our lives when we stood at a fork in the road, two choices in front of us – one choice was to listen to God’s Word and do what is pleasing to him while avoiding what is sinful, and the other choice is what we actually want to do because of how much fun it will be and how good it will feel. Maybe you have this same struggle with new year’s resolutions – instead of thinking about how good it would be to eat more salads, all we can think about is the burgers we would rather have. And instead of remembering how important it is to take care of the bodies God has given us, all we can think of is how much nicer the couch is than the treadmill. So instead of seeking Jesus, we find ourselves running down the other path, the one where sin is fun, we’re invincible, and Jesus can’t make me stop doing what I want to do.

So if that’s who we all are by nature, maybe we need to rephrase the question from before. A little bit ago, I asked why we’re all here today, but perhaps a better question is “HOW are we all here today?”. Because not only can we not seek and find Jesus on our own, but by nature we don’t even want to! We are a gathering of people who never in a million years should have known Jesus, who he is, or what he does.

Not terribly unlike the Magi, or wise men. Have you ever stopped to think about this account? It’s quite likely this isn’t new to us; we’ve heard about the wise men before – almost every manger scene on earth includes them at Jesus’ birth. It’s a nice picture, of course, but they weren’t there that night. We don’t know exactly when they showed up, but we know by the time they did, Jesus and his family were not in the stable anymore. They were staying in a house in Bethlehem, and it could be anywhere from a couple months to a couple years since Jesus was born. King Herod’s death decree was against any boys two years old and younger, but this could also be an extreme response just to make sure he didn’t miss getting rid of that “King of the Jews.” Regardless of when the Magi arrived, it’s completely shocking that they were there at all! Even if the Magi made new year’s resolutions to travel and see the world, nobody would have planned a trip that brought them to a little town called Bethlehem, never mind somehow ending up standing at the doorstep of the very same house which Jesus the Savior of the World was currently residing in. It’s insane to think of how astronomical the odds would be!

Unless, of course, God was involved. The Wise Men, just like me and you, would never seek the kind of Savior Jesus came to be, because we can't even admit we need a Savior like that. But if GOD does the seeking, that changes everything. In fact, the Bible makes it clear this is the only way anyone can ever know the true God, his love for his world, and just how far he was willing to go to show that love. In John 15:16, Jesus says, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*" And in Romans 5:8, we're told, "*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" And a short verse that many people have committed to memory from 1 John 4:19, "*We love because he first loved us.*"

In each one of those verses, and many other places in Scripture, God acts first. God seeks first. Even going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve sinned against God, they did not go running back to him, begging for forgiveness. No, they hid from him! Rather, it was GOD who went walking in the Garden, calling out to them, seeking the people he made and loved.

On a day like today, we get to see just how amazing that love of God is and how far it goes. Magi were wise men or priests – very learned people somewhere in the East. We don't know exactly where they were from, although suggestions have been made over the years. But they came from a place where the Word of God was very unlikely to be. They were people who shouldn't have known the Scriptures or the God who wrote them. They were seekers, yes, people desiring to grow and learn and know as much as humanly possible. But who would ever look up into the sky, see one star shining more brightly than the rest, and correctly interpret that as the sign that the Messiah Savior whom the God of Israel had promised thousands of years before had finally arrived and been born on the earth. It's impossible!

Again, unless God was involved. So through his Word, God worked in the hearts of the Magi and gave them the beautiful gift of faith in the Savior he sent. And he gave them knowledge and wisdom and a desire to search the heavens where he would plant the very sign they followed. And he led them to a place far from home, where they would present the King of kings with priceless gifts fit for the royalty he was. And yet it was not Jesus who went away richer, but the Wise Men who had seen him, for although they left behind treasures of tremendous worth, they went away having seen the Savior God sent to save even people like them from all their sins. They saw and knew the greatest love God ever showed this world.

And they weren't the only Gentiles God did that for. "Gentile" is a fancy word the Bible uses to talk about anybody that isn't a Jew. Even though Jesus was born a Jew, he did not come just to save Jewish people; he came to save ALL people. And that's a message God wants all people to hear! Which is how you and I are here today. We didn't seek Jesus because we were smart enough or because we tried hard enough to find him and finally managed to do it. No, we are the ones who were found. In a hymn we know and love called "Amazing Grace", we sing, "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." Jesus isn't the one who needs to be found – we are!

So find us he did. Because of God's unfailing mercy and amazing grace, he still seeks people all around the world to hear the good news about Jesus, to receive faith that believes this good news, and to have the priceless peace that comes with the certain knowledge that our sins are truly forgiven and our eternal home in heaven is secure.

Which brings us to why we are here. While we certainly can make new year's resolutions about things like praying more often, spending daily time in God's Word, and making it to worship and Bible class regularly, resolutions are not the main reason we come. We come because we know how much we need what God longs to give us. We come because we know there is nowhere else besides God that we can find these things we so desperately need. And because God has already sought us through his Word and given us faith which connects us to Jesus, we seek Jesus' as often as we can, delighting to sit at his feet and listen to his words, rejoicing to hear over and over again the promise that our sins are covered by his blood on the cross and eternal life is ours. The true treasure of Epiphany wasn't gold, frankincense, or myrrh; it's Jesus, a treasure for everyone.

So make new year's resolutions if you want to, or don't – either way is fine! But regardless of what you decide, don't let Jesus be only a new year's resolution. Jesus is so much more. He is God, wrapped in human flesh, to give us the priceless gift of a perfect life in his eternal presence and love. Keep hearing that message all year long. Keep spending time with Jesus every day, receiving what he freely gives us. And **keep seeking the One who sought you first**, for he loves us with an everlasting love, not just at the beginning of a new year, but today, tomorrow, and forever.

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, we praise you for appearing as the Savior of the World. If you had not sought us first, we never would have found you or even wanted you. But we thank you that you love us so much that you continue to seek us and find us, always bringing us back to you. Now use us as your instruments in the world to take the good news of forgiveness and life in you to as many other people as we can. Bless our efforts to spread your Gospel for the glory of your name, the good of your people, and the growth of your kingdom. AMEN!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.