

When it Comes to God's Saving Grace, Expect the Unexpected

Matthew 2:1-12

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A few moments ago I read the account of the wise men coming to visit Jesus as our Gospel lesson. So how many times have you heard that story? Probably as many times as you heard the story of Jesus' birth! It's an account that leaves us with questions. Where did these men come from? How did they know about the star? What happened to them after they left? How many were there? It's a story about which we often have to point out details that are folklore and not from the Bible: we don't know how many there were, there were three gifts, but the Bible never says three wise men. They weren't at the manger. The Bible tells us that they arrived at a house when they saw Mary and the baby. But rather than getting caught up in these details, I want you to consider what this account shows us about God's saving grace. If I had to come up with a phrase to capture it, I would use a phrase "expect the unexpected." We've heard this account so many times we are used to it, but when you take a step back it gives us tremendous insight into how God dispenses his undeserved love to sinners.

The first "unexpected" aspect of this account: The majesty of God's grace is often hidden in the common and ordinary. Now maybe that seems strange to say, I mean what about the moving star? That's pretty miraculous and majestic isn't it? I don't disagree. But have you ever stopped to think about the fact that only a few people saw it? Only this small group of men see this majestic phenomenon! And from there, the majesty is almost totally hidden. They are looking for the "king of the Jews," and they look in the logical place—Jerusalem, the palace. Maybe they thought that the child would be the son of the current king – Herod. But he's not there. So Herod, concerned for his throne, asks the Jewish religious leaders where the "Messiah", the king that the Jewish holy book pointed to, would be born. And they don't hesitate to give an answer – quoting the prophet Micah, they point him to Bethlehem. Bethlehem, for the most part, is an insignificant city. No palace there, no royal family there. But the wise men go and there, at that unexpected place, the star stops and they find the child Jesus. He's living in a common house with a common family. There's nothing that sets the child apart—no glowing halo, no wealthy parents—just a plain looking baby and his mother. And after they worshiped him and gave their gifts, there was no visible miraculous change in the wise men either. They didn't walk away with halos. They weren't magically transported back to where they came from. They left and went back home, avoiding Jerusalem. The majesty of God's grace is hidden in the common and ordinary.

That hasn't changed. Think about the people who have come to faith in Jesus. Do they suddenly look different from everyone else? Do they glow? Do they have halos? Are they suddenly more successful in their field of work? Do they suddenly become rich or more powerful than those who don't have faith in Jesus? No. They look the same. No visible change. How about the people that share the message of God's saving grace? Is it common for pastors and missionaries today to do visible miracles – heal the blind, raise the dead? No. They, too, are ordinary people. How about the tools God uses to bring people to faith in his saving grace: the word and sacraments? Does having a bible in the house stop thieves from breaking in? Does the water we use for baptism cure sickness? Do the elements we receive in the Lord's Supper give us superhero powers? No, and yet hidden in those ordinary looking tools of Word and Sacrament shared by ordinary people with ordinary people, is the power and majesty of God's greatest miracle of all. Through these ordinary looking means, he changes our eternal destination from hell to heaven. Maybe there are times when you're a little disappointed with the absence of flash or majesty as you walk your walk of faith. You wish God would make it more obvious that his way is the right way – give me a sign, a miracle. Remember the wise men, and the very ordinary looking child they found, and rejoice like they did that there, hidden in the ordinary, is the majesty that puts us in heaven.

We find the second "unexpected" aspect of this account in the reaction of the priests and teachers of the Law. Here we discover the sad reality that those who have known God's saving grace the longest are often the ones who take it for granted and reject it. Has the reaction of the priests and teachers of the Law in this account ever struck you or surprised you? These dignitaries from other countries come to visit the most powerful ruler in the region, King Herod. They claim to be looking for the promised Messiah. He isn't in Jerusalem. Herod asks where he would be born and they give an answer based on Scripture: Bethlehem. Then what do they do? *Pause* What do they do? NOTHING! They go home! These foreign dignitaries come and are following this moving star to go to Bethlehem to see this child that they have been waiting for for thousands of years and they do NOTHING! You'd think that even if they were skeptical, they would go just to check it out, even just to see if the moving star was real. You'd think they would be the ones to ask the wise men to come back and report where the child was, but they do no such thing. Those who had known about God's saving grace for generations reject it – don't pay attention to it. And later on when Jesus grows up, it's those very priests and teachers of the law that not only reject him, but direct his crucifixion.

Sadly, we see this same unexpected reality today, that those who have known God's saving grace for generations, become tired and bored with it and ultimately reject it, landing right back in the middle of the path to hell. Maybe you've

heard of Luther's comparison of the Gospel to a rain shower. It comes to one place, rains, and then as people become complacent, God moves on to another place. The message of salvation was first spread in Jerusalem and Judea. The percentage of Christians there today? About 2%. It then spread to Turkey and Syria. Today? There are about 1% in Turkey and 9% in Syria. It then spread to Europe and had a rebirth during the Lutheran Reformation. The percentage of Christians who regularly attend church in Europe today: about 2%. The United States has enjoyed freedom to worship and practice the Christian faith since the late 1700s. While still a significantly higher percentage of US citizens attend church and consider themselves Christians, both numbers continue to shrink. While almost every household in the US has a Bible, fewer and fewer people have a basic grasp of its content. The Bible is used at schools of theology in universities across the country, but with very few exceptions, those who teach it view it only as an interesting book, nothing more. Will the shower of God's grace move on, and if so, when? What are the danger signs for you and me personally? Do you come to church because you feel it is an obligation? A mark to check – a "yes" when the teacher asks if you were there? Do you go to chapel at WLA because it's part of the daily schedule and you might get in trouble if you don't? Is preparing to teach in a Christian classroom or preach in a pulpit becoming just a job? Is your Bible at home collecting dust? Those are danger signs. A reminder to remember the Bible's warning: **If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall.**

The final unexpected aspect of the wise men account is a little more heartening: God's grace brings faith in Jesus to those who we might never expect. What happened at Bethlehem that day was not ordinary! These men in their learning had heard God's message about his coming Messiah. It was not what most people in their country believed. It was obscure knowledge. It is likely that the captives in Babylon were the source of Bible teaching in the east, but we don't know for sure. In any case, contrary to logic and convention, contrary to the prevailing religious thought of the people in their country of origin, these men followed the star to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. Even though the religious leaders familiar with the Bible didn't go to see the Messiah, the wise men did. And when they found him, what does the Bible say? That they were **overjoyed!** They worshipped him. They brought him valuable gifts. God's grace changed the hearts of these foreigners from unbelief to faith. Not what you would have expected.

And that hasn't stopped either. God continues to bring people we wouldn't expect into his kingdom. In spite of horrific acts of groups like Isis, there are still faithful Christians boldly confessing in Syria. In China, where it is still technically against the law to belong to a Christian church that isn't sanctioned by the government, millions are converting to Christianity and being baptized each year. Christians are doing mission work with good results in places we would never expect: Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia. We have healthy missions on the east and west coast where hostility towards Christians is increasing. Even here in Fond du Lac, as our faithful jail ministry team does it's work, prisoners—some who will get out, some who will go on to life sentences—are being touched by the saving grace of God.

And how about you and me? We aren't such logical prospects as we might think sometimes. We are Gentiles. We are by nature hostile to God. We sin daily. We don't deserve God's love and salvation, yet here we are, gathered around his Word, confident in a future in heaven in spite of all the dangers, and attacks, and doubts, and fears that threaten our faith. So when you are feeling depressed or dejected, wondering, "Is this worth my time?" Wondering, "Can we really be right and so many others wrong?" Remember how God brought his saving grace to that group of foreigners and how they reacted – overjoyed, and how they gave their most valuable gifts to him. And treasure that gift, because it's yours too. When it comes to God's grace, expect the unexpected.

AMEN