**Matthew 2:1-12, selected verses** January 8, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany Sunday

*Matthew 2:1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him…”*

*5“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: 6‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel…’”*

*Mt 2:9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

Dear Friends in Our Savior Jesus,

**A Star To Be Seen by All**

A story is told of Pulitzer prize winning poet, Carl Sandburg. Back a few generations ago, when poets hefted a bit more weight in the public space, someone asked Mr. Sandburg, “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” Being a wordsmith, he thought for a moment. “…the ugliest word…the ugliest word… The ugliest word is… Exclusive.”

If you are on the outside, “exclusive” is an ugly word. The golf course with beautiful greens you can never hope to play on, the executive lounge, the first class seats on the plane, the luxury shops—we live with it, but every time you walk by one of these exclusive places that exclude you, it rankles you just a tiny bit knowing you can’t walk in that door or sit in that seat.

That was the problem with God’s plan. It was exclusive. Let me explain:

**I. What It Looks Like When God Shines the Light**

About 2,000 years before Jesus, lived the familiar Bible figure of Abraham. For reasons only known to God, God chose Abraham and said, *“I will make you into a great nation.”* (Gen 12:2). So for 2,000 years, from Abraham to Jesus, God’s people were Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites, later called the Jews; and the Jews were God’s people. Outsiders were let in, but not exactly welcomed. Outsiders coming into this exclusive club had to assimilate 100%. They had to eat like, dress like, act like Jews. They had to leave their old ways. For the 20 centuries while waiting for the right time for the Savior, one tribe of people were God’s people, almost exclusively.

It was kind of like when a wealthy parent with a young child dies. The wealth is put in a trust fund. The child cannot touch it until a certain age. Meanwhile, other people manage that wealth. But sometimes the trust fund managers come to like having this extra money around. Even if is not theirs, it enhances their status and does provide some benefits. Perhaps they will not be so eager to let go of the fund when the child comes of age.

The Israelites, the Jews, were the trust fund managers in God’s plan, from Abraham up to the time for the Savior to be born. And then, they would be equal with the others. But a great many Jews did not want to be equals with the rest. After all, they had been God’s people for 2,000 years.

That is the beauty of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is a Jewish man writing to a Jewish audience. He wants his fellow Jews to believe in Jesus as the Savior. Even though he is a Jew writing to Jews about the birth of a Jewish Savior, Matthew includes nothing of Joseph and Mary’s journey to the Jewish town of Bethlehem, or the Jewish shepherds in the fields listening to a chorus of angels. When God caused this Jewish writer to write to Jews about a Jewish Savior, the only thing he records about the birth is this visit of non-Jewish wise men. Do you hear the walls of exclusivity cracking?

God did not want to dispossess the Jews, but he did want them to see the bigger picture. He wanted them to rejoice in what they had, but also to realize how big and beautiful God’s plan is! It’s like the Jews had a picture of the Grand Canyon from a friend’s Facebook page on the 5” cell phone screen. Now God is calling them to stand on the actual physical edge of the Grand Canyon with only a handrail between them and a 6,000 foot deep, 18 mile across, 270 mile long gouge in the earth’s surface. Awesome! The Messiah wasn’t a Savior for one little group of people occupying a postage-stamp sized plot of land. He was so much more!

In Matthew, God wanted the Jew to step back in awe and realize it wasn’t just about them. As God had prophesied through Jewish prophets in our Old Testament reading: *“The glory of the Lord appears over you. Nations will come to your light…. Then your heart will throb and swell with joy”* (Isaiah 60:2-5).

Through the 28 chapters of his Gospel, Matthew subtly, but unavoidably highlights non-Jews in the narrative. In chapter two, the wise men. In chapter 8, Jesus says that a Roman soldier has greater faith than any Jew he has ever met. In chapter 15, Jesus’ encounters a Canaanite woman whom he praises for her faith. In chapters 21 and 22 Jesus tells parables about Gentiles in the house of faith. Finally, Matthew’s Jewish Gospel to Jews ends with these words: *“Go and make disciples of all nations.”* (28:19).

Matthew’s Gospel reveals to his compatriots that their time as the guardians of the true faith—their time as God’s exclusive people—is over. The doors of God’s temple open to all.

In these wise men, the first trickle of the flood arrives. We do not know whether they were three, or 12 or 100 or 7. We do not know what country they came from. The only thing about them that we know is the one detail that God wanted included. They were not Jews. Here we find out what God wants us to know–salvation for all is revealed in Jesus.

In the wise men being led to the baby Jesus, God impresses on us this truth from 1 Timothy 2, *“God our Savior wants all men to be saved… there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all”* (4-6).

This a sermon to each of us.

“Exclusive” is an ugly word when you are on the outside, but when we are on the inside, we like the word. We like having access to the exclusive. Isn’t that a standard advertisement – an “exclusive” offer? Exclusivity supposedly shows that we are a cut above others. We are smarter, richer, more powerful, better looking, more fun, harder working, whatever. Human nature likes exclusivity because it tells me what I already know, that I *am* better than others.

But here come the wise men. Their arrival in Bethlehem teaches us that while exclusive thinking is ugly in the world, it is positively blasphemous in the church. To be exclusive in the church is to grab God’s hand and tell him to stop spreading his blessings to the world – at least not to *everyone.*

We did not deserve the good things we have in Christ Jesus. We did not deserve to be saved from God’s punishment. But we have been. How can we keep any others out? How can we put even speed bumps in their way? How can we voice any prejudice? If God was pleased to bring us outsiders into his church, should we not be pleased to do the same for others?

That star in the sky for the wise men to see, teaches us that Jesus is the Savior for all people. It teaches us to speak and share the truth, to be inclusive, maybe even more inclusive than we are comfortable being.

**II. What It Looks Like When We See the Light**

The visit of the wise men teaches us about God’s plan of salvation. It also teaches us about ourselves. Did you see how they acted when God touched their hearts?

**A.** There are some people who drive a block to church. There are some who drive five miles. There are some, yes, some in this church, who drive most of an hour. But have you ever driven months, just to get to a church service? Would you ever dream of doing it? Me neither! But these guys did.

And when they got to church, so to speak (the manger at Bethlehem), they didn’t expect to be thanked for their efforts. They didn’t expect people to be impressed. The opposite happened. They were impressed, they gave thanks.

When they entered that house in Bethlehem where they expected to find ***“the king of the Jews,”*** they saw only Jesus and his mother, no servants. Joseph must have been out in the market or his carpenter-shop – we know not where. The wise men stood in an ordinary house of ordinary people. I don’t know what their first impression was – actually I do, because our reading says that their eyes of faith they were not disappointed, but ***“They were overjoyed.”*** The months offered to their Savior were worth it.

More than that, they got down upon their knees and worshiped this little child. His humble surroundings, his extremely tender age, they realized, was only reason to honor him more. He was their Savior!

**B.** Then they thanked him with their gifts. What gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, myrrh! Gold has obvious value. Frankincense was used, not surprisingly, for incense. It was one of those “quality of life” pleasures not enjoyed by the common person. Myrrh was another luxury item, used in cosmetics, medicine and spices. All of these are gifts worthy of a king, are they not?

But are these not, actually, very exclusive gifts? If treasure boxes full of gold, frankincense and myrrh are appropriate gifts, then what hope would we have to bring anything worthy of Jesus? Would God not receive our gifts like we receive unneeded gifts – with a half-embarrassed smile, quietly putting them in some closet to be forgotten? Or maybe even putting them in the car for the short trip to Goodwill? And what of the beggar on the street? And what about our children? What could they possibly offer Jesus if gold, frankincense and myrrh are the sorts of gifts that Jesus expects? If our gifts to Jesus must be worthy of a king, it would be useless to teach our children, as they ought to be taught, to bring part of their small allowance to Jesus. Then we would have to tell our children to keep their change, and wait until they had something worth giving to God.

And for us, our gifts would be a source of shame, because none of us can give what is truly worthy of our Savior! If our gifts must be equal to the glory of God, who could offer him anything? Even these wise men would have fallen short with their gold, frankincense and myrrh!

Indeed, that is why—or at least it is the excuse many give—for offering so little to their God. “Let the others who have more, give. What I have won’t really make a difference.” That is not the primary reason for anyone to give. The reason to give is simply that our Savior is worthy to receive our gifts. He is a great Savior who has given us so much!

These gifts of the wise men were not valuable because they were gifts worthy of this Christ-child. This Christ-child was too great for gifts like these. What made these gifts of the wise men great is that they were appropriate, not for the recipient, but for the givers.

How often the word of God encourages this kind of giving, proportional giving. God’s word invites us to lay at Jesus’ feet offerings *“in keeping with our income”* (1 Cor. 16:2). It tells us that *“the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.”* (2 Cor 8:12).

The importance of the wise men’s gift was not that Jesus needed it, but that Jesus accepted it as a sign of loving devotion. When we understand that, then we begin to understand giving to God.

As the wise men approach Bethlehem, God voices his acceptance of all, excluding none, who humbly draw near the Savior of the world. With those wise men, let us approach offering the best of ourselves to him. Amen.