

God (still) Abides

Matthew 2

Intro

Yesterday, the 6th of January, was the Christian celebration entitled Epiphany, or the materialization of Christ, of the savior, to the world.

I know, that's a whole lot of church speak to start a sermon. So let's try and put it into English. As the church became more established in the world, it started to create celebrations (or feasts) that the people would be able to take part in so as to deepen their faith, or at the very least the connection to the church.

They weren't scriptural, because there is no place that you will find Jesus saying to his disciples, 'on the 12th day of Christmas (do the math: it works!) I want you to remember me in a special way'.

But the reality is that after more than 1500 years, these celebrations are part of how we read scripture. This morning we are able to recognize how the savior comes into the world through the story of the wise men coming to Bethlehem. Jesus is an infant...and yet they know that this child is 'The One'.

That is a powerful statement...and it takes up the first 12 verses.

And then I kept reading. The rest of reading also shows a level of belief that this Jesus is special, but the reaction to his entrance into the world is dramatically different.

My question is this: in a world that continues to exhibit polar reaction to the presence of God in the world (in addition to all of the reactions in between), where do you believe God abides? The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 2

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 3asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' 4When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 5and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 6They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 7 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." ' 8 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 9 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' 10 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 11 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 12 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' 14Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.' 16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.' 19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' 21Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

'God (still) Abides'

One of the questions that is asked by people of all varieties is why do bad things happen to good people. In addition to its complementary question (why do good things happen to bad people), another query follows not far behind: if there is a God, why would he allow horrible tragedies to take place in the world?

As I read through this chapter of Matthew, those were the questions that moved from the background to the foreground. The reason that I phrase it like that is because we'd love to focus on the story of the Wise Men and how they were able to pull 'a fast one' on Herod. My guess (in the sheltered church world that I live in) is that most people who know a little bit about the Nativity story, that's where the story...stops. I kid you not, that was how the lectionary reading ended as well. It went through the happy portion of the scripture and then concluded.

But is that a fair, let alone complete appreciation of what the Wise Men story tells us in regard to who God is? Obviously (as we have just read the whole chapter), I don't think so.

So let's talk about some of what we hear in the midst of these verses.

First off, as we have mentioned over the last few weeks, God keeps his promises. The interesting thing is, that the wise men (and not the people of Jerusalem) are the ones who have maintained faith in those promises that were spoken of in the prophets. It's foreigners who come into town reminding them of a prophecy in Numbers 24:17 that declares, 'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near — a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.' There was something different happening in the nighttime sky...and the people of Israel didn't connect it to what God had declared so long ago, until somebody else came knocking on the door to remind them of the promise (Simeon and Anna, anyone?).

God is at work in the world. The timing may feel utterly odd and literally impossible,...and God still moves. Whether or not we appreciate that movement in the world will depend on how closely we walk with God, and certainly how we view God at work in the world.

God keeps His promises. Again, as we asked last Sunday, will you trust that and have faith that it is true for you...today? God abides in His promises.

The next thing that we pick up is that the Spirit of God whispers into the midst of people's lives. Do you know the phrase, 'Make time for the quiet moments, as God whispers and the world is loud'? A variation of that (the dreams of the wise men and of Joseph) take place several times in the midst of this story. I believe that God is able to speak through a variety of circumstances (and not all of them are quiet), but there feels to be so much truth in the fact that

the winds of the world can distract us to the point that we either aren't able to hear God speaking, or we blow it off as nothing more than a moment of happenstance.

It's not!

We may not realize that until after the fact but scripture shows us that the Spirit of God leads His people in a multitude of different ways. We are His people, His children, and the ways that God breathes into the world have not disappeared as the millennia have come and gone. God is still speaking and sometimes that call may feel like nothing more than whisper. But we need to remain attentive for those whispers, following them, declaring them, letting others know how we have heard the whisper of God so that we don't feel like some sort of a weird-o that thinks we are hearing voices that don't exist (you know, when we're the one hearing the voice).

The world is so loud, and so busy, and we have trained our eyes, our ears, and our minds to feel like we are missing out on something if we are not perpetually putting them to use. Seriously, how many people would throw a fit if they were forced to turn over their phone, pull out the earbuds, and shut off the TV or tablet and simply...be? We've allowed ourselves to believe that if we don't have these things that we aren't taking advantage of the world that has been created which necessarily means that we are 'missing out'.

Maybe what we are missing out on, is the recognition that God's Spirit is calling for us to follow in this, that, or the other way? Maybe that's what we're missing as we fill our lives with ever mounting amounts of worldly content.

God abides in His whispers into our lives...and we need to be intentional as we listen for those moments.

Two more realities we are able to draw.

God abides in the joys. I know, you may be wondering after listening to the totality of the chapter where these joys exactly lie. As I hear these verses, I hear joy in the perseverance of a new family. The savior of the world has come into the world and there was plenty of writing on the wall (let alone what actually transpired – and we will get there in a few minutes) that the world wanted nothing to do with God incarnate. So to be able to hear how Joseph (and therefore his family) were led through the wilderness,

literally, so as to survive to the point in time when they were ultimately able to thrive, is the point when I hear how God abides in the joys of life.

‘There he made his home’. Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the siblings that ultimately came (and may have been there by the time they ultimately settled in Nazareth), making a home. I get that it may not sound like much to our ears, but just because our ears have skewed wants into needs doesn’t mean that what we are told in that short phrase isn’t a reminder of how God is with us. The way that Matthew tells the story, Mary, Joseph and Jesus were a displaced family, running for their lives, living in a foreign county. All of a sudden, ‘there he made a home’ is able to be understood as the blessing that it is...and God abides in that joy.

Now I recognize that what we have talked about so far is, at worst, neutral in terms of how it affects our lives.

And that’s why we read the whole chapter. Herod’s reaction to his, at the very least, worry that God was actually being born into the world causes many people, causes many of us, to wonder, to worry that God has checked out, or really isn’t as all powerful as we have been taught, as we hope. Again, he killed all the children around Bethlehem under the age of 2.

For those of us who dwell in that space, I invite us to look again at the meal that is before us. The meal of communion is a reminder that our God is powerful enough to work through death so as to bring life, and not only life, but life eternal. We hear in Ecclesiastes that, ‘For

everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven’ (which is then followed up by a myriad of polar opposite examples), and even a cursory examination of scripture reminds us that the presence of God does not exclude pain, sadness, hatred, or unfairness. God’s presence empowers His people, empowers us to take the steps that will lead through those periods of grief toward whatever life is about to reveal...and no, that doesn’t mean that everything gets ‘happy’.

Blessed? Now were talking.

Happy? Not necessarily. God abides with us in the midst of our lives, and yes, that means the sorrows as well. The world is broken. Evil is a part of our lives. If this wasn’t the case then we wouldn’t have needed Jesus.

But it is, and we do.

As we read our scripture this morning we are reminded that God keeps His promises, that God speaks through the whispers, that God abides in the joy, and yes, God abides in the sorrow. All of it. God is with us in all of it.

I don’t know what you may have needed to hear this morning, but my prayer is that wherever you are, that you are able to be reminded that God is with you even there (wherever there may be). God abides...with you.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, as we are shown Your presence through how Your son came into the world, we are able to be reminded again of how You are able to abide with us in every season of life. This may not be a comfortable reality, but that doesn't make it any less true. God You keep Your promises, You continue to speak, and You abide with us in the joys and the sorrows. Lord, thank You for these truths, and thank You for Your Son who allows us to be known as Your daughters and sons. It is in Jesus' name that we do pray. Amen.