

This week we are beginning a new worship series, *The Call of God*. As we draw the Christmas season to a close, we begin the season of Epiphany. This season has always been about seeing the light that is Jesus the Christ breaking forth into the world in which we live. Seeing is only the first step, however. We don't see the light of Christ the same way we see the beauty of the Grand Canyon, for example, or a particularly beautiful sunset. While there is beauty in the presence of Christ, it is a beauty that calls for a response. There are many ways to respond to the presence of Christ. In this series, we focus on the invitation, the Call of God.

Unless you have been living under a rock, you have seen and heard about the scenes that happened in our nation's capital this week, on the actual day of Epiphany. It's likely that you found the images and commentary disturbing, as I did. As I mentioned earlier, we are beginning this new worship series. For a while I thought that I would have to completely change my plan due to current events, but the more I looked at it, the more that I realized that this is the perfect time for it. Even when we don't know, God knows. I say that without a trace of irony.

As we spent December closely examining the Incarnation of Jesus and what that means, as last week we heard Rev. deVega talk about the hope we have, it is time to look at our part in that. Look at how God calls us and how we live that out, most especially in the challenging times. This is whether the challenge is within our own personal lives, the circumstances around us, or both.

On Epiphany Sunday we recognize and remember the time when people outside the Jewish faith recognized Jesus as King, as leader, as someone worth worshiping. We will be returning to a passage that we have looked at in different parts and from different angles a couple of times recently. We often hear about the tumultuous times of Judea in Jesus' day. Herod the Great was king over the whole area at the time. Because the people didn't like Herod, frequently there were pockets of rebellion, which Herod took no time to stamp out. The civil discord may not sound too different from what we are experiencing right now though it was much worse and going on for much longer.

Out of Herod's vision, beneath his notice, there was a baby born in Bethlehem. Why would he notice it? There were babies being born in his kingdom all the time. But then something happened that made him notice. That is where our Scripture picks up. Today, I will be reading out of The VOICE translation, so it may sound fresh to our ears. Hear the word of the Lord:

Matthew 2:1-12

2:1 Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, in the province of Judea, at the time when King Herod reigned. Not long after Jesus was born, magi, wise men or seers from the East, made their way from the East to Jerusalem. These [magi] made inquiries.

[Magi]: 2 Where is this newborn, who is the King of the Jews? When we were far away in the East we saw His star, and we have followed its glister and gleam all this way to worship Him.

3 King Herod began to hear rumors of the [magi's] quest, and he, and all of his followers in Jerusalem, were worried. 4 So Herod called all of the leading Jewish teachers, the chief priests and head scribes, and he asked them where Hebrew tradition claimed the long-awaited Anointed One would be born.

Scribes and Priests: *5 An ancient Hebrew prophet, Micah, said this:*

*6 But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are no poor relation—*

*For from your people will come a Ruler
who will be the shepherd of My people Israel. (Micah 5:2)*

7 Herod called the [magi] to him, demanding to know the exact time the special star had appeared to them. 8 Then Herod sent them to Bethlehem.

Herod: *Go to Bethlehem and search high and low for this Savior child; and as soon as you know where He is, report it to me so that I may go and worship Him.*

9-10 The [magi] left Herod's chambers and went on their way. The star they had first seen in the East reappeared—a miracle that, of course, overjoyed and enraptured [them]. The star led them to the house where Jesus lay; 11 and as soon as [they] arrived, they saw Him with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. They unpacked their satchels and gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 And then, just as Joseph did ... before, the wise men had a dream warning them not to go back to Herod. The wise men heeded the dream. Ignoring Herod's instructions, they returned to their homes in the East by a different route.

The word of Life.

Thanks be to God!

Why would there be a sign of a star at the birth of the Jewish Messiah? And why would those outside the Jewish community care about the birth of a Jewish king? There are two ideas that come together here: the prophecy of a king and the ideas around a star. First, the king: Roman historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, both write about how at that time, "Everywhere throughout the East [people] were looking for the [coming] of a great king who was to rise from among the Jews." The prophecies of a Messiah from Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 9 and 11) and Daniel (cf. Daniel 7) had spread around the region. (E. H. Plumptre, "Matthew," *A Bible Commentary for English Readers*, ed. Charles John Ellicott [London: Cassell and Company, 1905], Matthew 2:2, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/matthew/2.htm>). Naturally, I was familiar with the biblical references. Matthew tells us about many in his Gospel, but I was surprised to learn that other peoples took these ideas seriously as well.

The second thing is about is the star. There were stories of stars appearing at the birth of important leaders such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Then, these ideas got connected together. (Plumptre, Matthew 2:2).

The magi, religious astrologers, from the region around Persia or modern day Iran, were so moved at the sight of this "star" that they were compelled to seek after this king they heard was coming. They were called. Last year at Epiphany we talked about how important it is for us to continue to seek after God. This was something that the Judean wise men, even after being confronted with the magi, did not do. This year we are turning that around. We are focusing on God's call to us and our response to that call. God put a star before the magi that they were compelled to follow. It was what they needed. What is God putting before you?

That is a question to consider this Epiphany season that takes us the next several weeks into Lent. What attracts you about God, about Jesus?

The church as a whole, especially the western church in recent decades, has been in the midst of change. After a peak of people participating in the local church in the 1950s and 60s following World War II, the number of people participating has gradually been declining. In more recent times this has been speeding up. There had been the thought of what can we do as churches to attract people to come back, to come again, to find value in being part of a particular church. People have studied and worked so hard to have vital churches and make disciples, help people live the Christian life. Yet, the numbers are still declining.

In the midst of all of this, a different model, or perspective was offered, the missional model. Instead of trying to attract people with programs and entertainment to compete for attention with sports, just as one example, the church goes out to the people much as the Apostle Paul going to the riverside to meet Lydia because that's where the people were. (cf. Acts 16:13-15) You can think of it as the church deployed, out in the field rather than gathered together.

Right now no matter how you feel about it, *we* are the church deployed. This is the time that we have trained for, so that in these extreme circumstances we know what to do. We have to be intentional about taking care of others. We may have to find other means to maintain relationships and friendships. AND YOU HAVE ... We need to continue to be creative about it.

All of that is good, but in it was are talking about the church. And yet, God does draw us, attract us, even when we are the church deployed. God still calls to us.

It took me a long time to become a Christian, a follower of Jesus. I was interested, curious, from the time I was young without much participation in the formal church. Yet, repeatedly I was drawn to God, the Bible, churches. Even after I had been hurt by those I considered "church people," I would still come back. I would engage for a while and then drift away.

For at least six months, I went to a Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In all that time, I don't recall anyone talking to me, even once, but this is not a story about church hospitality. The point is that I **still** kept coming, every week. I was drawn to it. I was drawn to God. This is just one episode. God kept calling to me in many different ways. Ways that were meaningful to me.

In this way, I was like the magi, not knowing what I was being called to. I knew it was important, but I didn't know why. Really, we all start out like magi, being called to something that we don't understand. It might have

been as a child. Then you found God and embraced him. Maybe, you were like Jacob in the Older Testament where you were there early but had to leave and come back. Your journey might have started later in life.

How does God call you? What draws you to Jesus? What has done it in the past? What draws you now? What is it that you find compelling, interesting, appealing? What draws you closer? Think about that over the coming week. Think about it over the next several weeks?

When I tried to do this exercise, I found it challenging. When I thought about the beginning of my journey, I couldn't come up with anything more specific than that I was compelled. I just had to do it. I was curious. I kept finding myself in churches, even if I was disengaged. I kept finding myself in the Bible section of the bookstore.

When I think of why now, it's because after following Jesus and applying Jesus' teaching to my life, I have found that God's ways work. I believed in the world's ways for a long time. The world's ways *seemed* to work for others, but they never worked for me, no matter how hard I tried. If this week showed us anything, perhaps it illustrates that the world's ways don't really work for anyone. Love really is the answer. It starts with the love that God has shown for the world, the love that God has shown us. Then, we continue by showing that love to others. Willingness to be humble, to defer to others. Letting go of our pride in our own righteousness. This is the opposite of what the world says. To love God, love our neighbor, and to do to others as you would have them do to you.

The irony is that doing this does not make living in this world easy. There are still storms. There are still spiritual battles, but God, our Emmanuel, will be with us through them. This is the beauty of God's call to us to give us access to God's help in times of need. This is true from the events of the world swirling around us to our very individual and personal needs.

Mark Batterson is a pastor in Washington D.C., *bless his heart*. He tells a story saying, "I have a friend who has had a migraine for five years. Moments of relief are few and far between. The pain became so debilitating that he eventually had to resign from the church he was pastoring. He's been to countless specialists. He's tried a wide variety of treatment plans. Nothing seems to help much or for long.

"I asked him how he's managed the pain and the emotions that go with it. He said, 'I've learned to kiss the wave.' I must have given him a quizzical look, so my friend explained. He was quoting Charles Spurgeon: 'I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.'

"Kissing the wave doesn't mean we don't experience storms or get seasick during them. The good news? There is a God who can rebuke the wind and the waves with these words: 'Peace, be still.' But before you rebuke the storm, you need to accept it. You can't move past the pain if you ignore it or hide it or deny it."

Maybe, you've been finding yourself thrown against the Rock of Ages lately. It could be having more than enough of all things pandemic related. You may be finding yourself or loved ones ill, either related to it or not. It could be from the civil strife happening in our country. Finding that it's bubbling beneath the surface all the time to have it burst out here or there periodically like an erupting volcano. It can be the stress of the everyday parts of living that just become too much for us.

We can be like that volcano within ourselves, always bubbling underneath, trying to suppress the fear, the depression, the rage. Trying to pretend that it isn't there, that it isn't important or doesn't affect us. If we try to suppress it, tamp it down, it will come exploding out a different way. But, like Mark tells us, we can't calm the volcano. We can't move forward in a healthy way until we accept the reality of where we are.

Once we do that, we can go to God. We can pray for healing, for peace. Here I don't mean the absence of conflict in our land (though that would be good too). I mean the peace within ourselves, remembering that God walks with us through the storms, through the volcanoes. As God says through the prophet Isaiah chapter 43, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze" (Isaiah 43:2 NIV).

Then, you will be ready to go to the Lord with the question, What have you come to teach me?

Mark goes on to say, "When we find ourselves in difficult situations, we get so focused on getting out of them that we *fail to get anything out of them* [emphasis mine] ... There is nothing wrong with asking God to change your circumstances, but His primary objective is changing you. The circumstances you're asking God to change may be the very circumstances He is using to change you. (Excerpted from *Win the Day: 7 Daily Habits to Help You Stress Less & Accomplish More*. Copyright © 2020 by Mark Batterson)

That's *why* God is calling to us. That is why God continues to call to us. Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season. Traditionally, it is a time when we take down the Christmas decorations and put away the lights. What looked bright and festive is now dark and cold.

When you put away your decorations, do you put God away too? Do you drift back to "normal," whatever "normal" means right now? Maybe with everything that is different in this time, this could be different too. God remaining a priority. God is still calling to you. What around you are the signs of God's call. What are those things that are as special and unique **to you**, as special and unique as **you are**.

Ponder this. It may take you some time, just as it did for me. When you realize how special God's call is for you, designed especially for what you need and who you are, you will see the love that God has for you.

May it be so. Amen!