

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

Pastor Troy Schreiner www.victorylutheran.org

Worship Series: *Good News of Great Joy*

Service Theme: *For All People*

Sermon Theme: *When God Says All, He Means All*

January 7, 2024—Matthew 2:1-12

The word “all” is really impactful, right? If a teacher tells her students, “You’re all excused from doing homework tonight,” she’d have no right to keep a few kids in from recess the next day for not doing their homework. If I tell my kids, “You can eat all of the cake,” I can’t be upset if they don’t leave me a piece. If someone states in their will, “I leave it all to my oldest child,” there’s no quibbling about who gets what. Because all means all; in totality; without exceptions or exclusions!

For the last few weeks, we’ve focused on the Good News of Great Joy the angels proclaimed to the shepherds on the first Christmas—the Savior of the world is born! And in their words, we hear that operative word: ***“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”*** The Savior’s birth is good news that causes great joy for ALL the people. Not for some people, but for all people; in totality; without exceptions or exclusions!

The Festival of Epiphany we’re celebrating today, and this morning’s sermon text where we meet the Wise Men or Magi, prove that Jesus’ birth is good news for all people, and that **When God Says All, He Means All.**

In his Gospel account, the Apostle Matthew writes, ***“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem, and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”***

Most people know about these wise men. They’re usually included in nativity scenes. Most people can hum the tune to, “We Three Kings of

Orient Are.” Most people remember gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But while many people know about these Magi, there’s a lot we don’t know about them. Where in “the east” were they from? How many magi were there? How old was Jesus when they came? What did “magi” do for a living? We can’t say for sure, because God’s Word doesn’t tell us. But we can make some assumptions.

Most likely, these Magi came from the area where the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires had previously reigned. Which means they trekked at least 1,000 miles through desert terrain to visit Jesus in Bethlehem. And they probably weren’t kings, like the song suggests. More likely, Magi were religious priests who practiced divination and sorcery; or astronomers, astrologers, or simply wise advisors to the king—or maybe all the above!

While God didn’t reveal all the details, what we do know points to one important truth: these Magi were incredibly unlikely recipients of the good news of Jesus! First, they were Gentiles who didn’t belong to God’s chosen people of Israel. Second, they likely were descendants of the Assyrians or Babylonians, the enemies who’d conquered, captured, and exiled God’s people. Third, they came from so far away, it would have necessitated them setting aside 2.5 months of their lives to make the roundtrip to Bethlehem. Fourth, their occupation was likely something God had called sinful and forbidden for his people. With all those strikes against them, any Jewish person reading this account say, “Them?!?”

In fact, that’s probably why Matthew is the only one of the four Gospels that records the visit of the Gentile Magi. Matthew, by God’s inspiration, wrote his Gospel account for Jewish readers, in order to show them that God’s grace is universal. That Jesus came to be the Savior of the world-- of ALL the people, including the Gentiles! God wanted the Jews to read this account and ask, “Them?!?” so he could resoundingly answer, “Yes, them! Them, and all people!”

The very fact that these Gentile Magi end up in Bethlehem to worship Jesus is proof that God wants all people to know the Gospel. Everything that needed to happen for the Magi to meet Jesus shows

God's purposeful intentionality to show all people, even the most unexpected people, that Jesus is their Savior too!

God literally changed the cosmos to make this happen! One night, the Magi spotted a star in the sky they'd never seen before. But how did that lead them to Jesus? Spotting this new star reminded them of a Jewish prophecy that a star would announce the birth of a new king of the Jews. Likely, it was the one from the Gentile prophet Balaam, recorded in this morning's first reading from Numbers, ***"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."*** But how could these Gentile Magi know ancient Jewish prophecy? As I said earlier, these Magi were likely descendants of the Assyrians, Babylonians, or Persians—all which had exiled Jews as neighbors. So, the Jewish exiles must have shared the truth of God with their Gentile neighbors!

But how did that get them to Bethlehem? We sometimes picture the star leading the Magi like some ancient GPS. However, the star announced the birth of a new king of the Jews, so the Magi went to Jerusalem, the capital city. Because where else would you expect a new king of the Jews be born? This led to their interaction with King Herod and the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the Law, who knew the prophecies about the Messiah so well, they immediately knew where he would be born, quoting another prophecy 700 years earlier from the prophet Micah: ***"In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"*** As they set out for Bethlehem, the star returned, and ***"went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was."***

Think of all the chess pieces on the board of human history God had to move over nearly a millennium to ensure that these Gentile Magi would have the chance to meet, know, and worship their Savior, Jesus! And that all the people in their homeland they told once they returned from their journey might hear the Good News of their Savior too!

When God said that Jesus' birth is good news for all people, he meant that it's good news for all people! And God has continued to move the

chess pieces throughout world history since, to ensure that all people know the good news of their Savior!

Martin Luther once said, ***"God's Word and grace are like a passing rain shower."*** He meant that the locations in which the Gospel is being most prominently proclaimed and having the greatest spiritual impact has often shifted and moved around the globe throughout history.

As Jesus told his Apostles after his resurrection, ***"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*** The message of Christ was first primarily proclaimed in Jerusalem. But then the Apostles and missionaries of the early Christian church took the Gospel message in ever-widening circles.

As Paul carried out his ministry to the Gentiles, the Gospel spread to Greece, Turkey, and the reaches of the Roman Empire. Later, Christianity expanded into the kingdoms and empires in the heart of Europe, including the Lutheran Reformation in Germany. Then, explorers and colonists took the Gospel to the new world in North America. In recent centuries, America became a hub of Christianity. And now, Christianity is flourishing in places like Africa, South America, and the Asian-Pacific. The number of Christians in the Asian-Pacific is projected to increase by 33% between 2010 and 2050! In 1900, it was estimated that there were only 9 million Christians in Africa. By 2000, the number had risen to 380 million. And it's projected that by 2025, that number will double to 760 million!

Obviously, God is ensuring that the Gospel continues to reach all people and all nations! And it's no surprise that in countries and continents where people have been starved for the Gospel, those who are finally feasting on it are coming to faith in astonishing numbers, and hungering for more! Just like those Magi who traveled from around the world to worship an unknown child as their King and Savior!

What we have to wrestle with is whether we're more like those Gentile Magi, or more like the Jewish chief priests? When the Magi showed

up in Jerusalem, the chief priests knew exactly where the Messiah would be born, because they knew the Scriptures like the back of their hand. And yet, they didn't accompany the Magi to Bethlehem. While they were saturated with God's Word and promises, they'd become apathetic about it, and taken for granted the message they knew so well.

Have we? While Christianity is flourishing in places previously starved of the Gospel, like Africa and Asia, we've seen steep declines in Christianity in places where the Gospel was so prevalent, like in Europe and here in North America. Are we as eager as the Magi to come and worship our Savior? Are we willing to sacrifice our time, money, or priorities to worship and serve Jesus with our lives?

The reality is, as the Gospel has moved like a passing rainstorm around the globe, it's often shifted away from people who had grown apathetic or even opposed to that Gospel message, determining that Jesus isn't for them. And as our country experiences a major decline in those who confess the Christian faith, we have to evaluate whether we've also become personally apathetic about, or taken for granted the peace and joy of Christ.

We can't let that happen, because when God says all, he means all! As Paul writes in Romans 3, ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** All have sinned and fallen short of God's requirement of holiness. All people, without exception or exclusion-- including us! Which means, we're all entirely reliant on Jesus to save us! To be apathetic or indifferent toward the Gospel is to throw away the one thing we need most, because we're included in that “all people” who are helpless sinners.

But when God says all, he means all! Paul continues his thought, ***“And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”*** That means you, and all people have the forgiveness and salvation we need in Christ, no matter what!

The reality is, you'll never meet a single person in this world for whom this isn't true: All people are sinners who need Jesus to be their

Savior. But all people have also been justified and forgiven through the life, death, and resurrection of that child born in Bethlehem! All people are perfectly loved by God through Jesus! It doesn't matter if they're black or white; Jew or Gentile; man or woman; rich or poor; gay or straight; Republican or Democrat; old or young. Nothing changes the fact that ALL people are sinners in need of a Savior, and ALL people are sinners who Jesus has won forgiveness and salvation for! All! In totality! Without exceptions or exclusions!

Which means that ALL people need to hear that good news, which applies to all people! All people here in our backyard, and all people on the other side of the world. That's why the WELS is seeking to establish 100 new missions in the U.S. in the next 10 years, including, God-willing, Victory's second campus in St. Johns County. That's why WELS is currently doing international mission work in 44 countries, with 18 prospective mission fields, and counting! Because all people need to know the good news that Jesus is their Savior!

However long ago, someone saw you or your ancestors as people who needed to know the Gospel, because God wants all people to be saved. So let's go and share the good news of great joy with all people no matter how different or unexpected they might be! Because when God says all, he means all.