

“Where Is God?”

Matthew 2:1-12

January 5, 2020

A pastor was called to a couple’s home at the sudden death of their teenage son. When the pastor arrived, an angry father greeted the pastor by asking, “Where was God, Pastor, when my son died? Why would He allow my son to die?” The pastor, struggling for something to say that would bring some comfort to the man responded, “The same place He was when His Son died.”

All of us experience tragic struggles that cause us to ask, “Where is God?” When we feel like our loving Heavenly Father is absent in the midst of difficulties, suffering, and worries it can test our faith, cause us to question our faith, or even cause us to deny our faith. Our expectations are that God will always be there to guard, protect, and save us from the trials and tragedies of life.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we see some Wise Men from the east who come to Jerusalem and ask King Herod a similar question, “Where is he, who has been born king of the Jews?” These Wise Men were most likely astronomers, who searched and read the stars, looking for guidance and direction in their lives. Now this was not necessarily a bad thing, as the stars were put in their place by our God; and they do provide guidance and direction, marking north, south, east, and west. They have even been used by our astronauts to make their way through space and to find their way back to earth. These Wise Men likely lived hundreds of miles to the east of the Israel and they probably had little training in the Bible. But apparently they had heard about how the Jews longed for a Messiah – perhaps from Numbers 24:17 which contains a prophecy of a king and a star that reads, “...a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;” but they probably didn’t know much than that.

And yet, when the Lord showed them a special star in the east they set out on a risky trip that could take months, cost them a lot of money, it might even be dangerous with no guarantee that they would ever find this newborn king. So why did they do it? Last year, according to an internet search, \$145 million was bet on the Super Bowl in Las Vegas casinos. And I’m sure even more money was bet in other states or changed hands privately. No matter what the real numbers were, that’s a lot of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – a lot of people looking at stats and maybe even the stars in guessing which team would win the championship. So why do people do it? For some people it may make the game more interesting; others may believe that they can make money, maybe even get rich. Some take great risks and put themselves in danger of losing a lot on one game. But the Wise Men’s journey was worth the risks, because there really was no risk, it was no gamble that this newborn King of the Jews would turn them away. He was the Savior. So when the Wise Men asked King Herod, “Where is he?” they were anxious and excited to get close to this newborn king and to worship Him. But when people today ask that question, “Where is he?” they are often like that father at the door when the pastor arrived at his house. They want to know where this all-loving and all-present God is in a world that is filled with sin and darkness.

So where is God? The first answer we could give is that He is in His Son. Throughout history, God has been present among his people. First, physically, as he walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Later, God’s presence was on Mount Sinai, when Moses received the 10 Commandments; and then in the temple in Jerusalem. But then in the midst of a long period of time in the Old Testament in what appeared to be God’s absence from the people because of their sin and rebellion, prophets sent by God prophesied about one who would come to restore God’s presence, whose name would be called Immanuel, “God with us.” Then in the verses leading up to our text for today, the angel Gabriel came to Joseph in a dream and assured him that God’s plan was unfolding. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and birth to a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.’” – Matthew 1:22-23.

Scripture clearly teaches that God reveals himself and presents himself in the person of His Son, Jesus. In John 14, after one of Jesus’ disciples asked Him, “show us the Father,” Jesus replies, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” So when that father asked the pastor, “Where was God when my son died?” we know He was in the same place when His Son died on the cross. He was connecting with all people as He offered His Son on the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, and He continues to come to all people to bring comfort, forgiveness, and peace.

The problem for many people is that although they believe that God is present in His Son, Jesus, they still feel alienated from Him because of their guilt, fears, and doubts. So they still search for some tangible means through which they can feel His presence and power. That's a challenge we all face is to understand how this God, who revealed himself in His Son, Jesus, is truly present with us today. Where does He get in touch with us? How can we experience His presence? Where is God? The second answer we can give to that question is God reveals Himself in His Sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Through water and the Word of God in Baptism, our God comes to us and adopts us into His family as His children, (just as He did in Mark Gabriel this morning). Baptism is God's announcement that the sin which should have separated us from Him forever has been removed, and we are now one with Him forever.

Likewise, God continues His presence in our life through the gift of His body and blood in bread and wine of Holy Communion. He comes to us in a real, yet mysterious way, in that bread and wine to forgive our sins and strengthen our faith so that we may live with Him. These two gifts of Baptism and Communion assure us in a visible way that God is with us to sustain us in our suffering, to equip us when our faith is tested, and to strengthen us in the midst of our burdens and worries. Where is God? He is in Jesus, He is in His Word, He is in our Baptism, and He comes to us in the Lord's Supper right here every Sunday.

But there is a third way to answer that question. He is in our service to others. As God seeks to be with us, He has also chosen to make His presence known through us. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 6 that God lives in each one of us saying, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have received from God?" As our world searches for the answer to the question "Where is God?" the Church, all of us as the body of Christ, bring His presence into the lives of people through our acts of loving service. God has blessed the Church with all that's necessary for it to be imitators of Christ and to bring His compassion, care, and comfort to a world overwhelmed with the darkness of sin and death. We do this through all of our ministries, and you will especially see this in a new ministry we will begin offering this month known as Stephen Ministry: a one-to-one Christian care ministry to hurting people that is designed to make a congregation a warmer, more loving community.

When the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem at the palace of King Herod, for where else would you find a king but in a palace of a royal city they thought, Herod remembered that there was a prophecy in God's Word about such a king. So he asked the priests and scribes if they knew where this king was to be born. They knew where to look as they remembered the words of the prophet Micah, who said "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2) So the Wise Men followed the Word of God and the star to Bethlehem and they found the Christ Child. I'm sure the Wise Men were surprised to find this baby in a humble setting, born to a simple carpenter's family. But they believed the Word they had heard. Recognizing that God was in this child, they worshipped Him and they served Him by presenting Him with gifts fit for a king. This was the way in which they honored Him.

Today, the gifts that honor Him are our lives offered in service and sacrifice to others. So knowing that God comes to us in His Son, in His Word, in His Sacraments, and in the lives of people sitting around us, let us leave this place today like Wise Men anxious to worship Him, ready to serve Him, and let us faithfully give Him our very best in this new year, knowing there is no risk that our God will ever leave us.