

Inside Out
Matthew 2:1 – 12; Ephesians 3:1 – 12
Sunday, January 5, 2020

I'm going to start off this sermon in a way that I don't normally like to do. I'm going to talk about the Eagles. And the *reason* that I don't normally like to do this is because, even though I like football and I love the Eagles, I think that as a culture we already deify sports and athletes too much. So I don't want to do something that creates too much of a parallel between that and God. But in this case, it's a really good analogy, so just take this for what it is – an *analogy*.

The Eagles made it to the playoffs after an improbable late season run. If you paid any attention to them at all this year, then you know that there is *no way* that this team should have won their division and made the playoffs. Because up until about a month ago, they were *bad*. Like lose-to-one-of-the-worst-teams-in-the-league bad. They had lost three games in a row, and everyone had written them off. And the biggest *reason* that they were so bad and everyone had written them off was because of *injuries*. All throughout the season, their best players kept getting injured. Their three best receivers got injured, so they had to play the backups. But then the *backups* got injured, so they had to put in the *backups* to the backups. At one point even *those* backups got hurt, and they were thinking about putting in a 40-year-old *quarterback* at receiver, which if you don't know anything about football, *that's not good*. *Everyone* was getting injured. It eventually got so bad that they had to put in players from their practice squad (those are the guys that only play in practice, because they don't care how bad they get beat up by the “real” players). And again, if you don't know anything about football, *that's not good*.

But, even with all of these backup backups and practice team players, the Eagles started *winning*. They won their last four games in a row. And they were doing it with players that no one had ever heard of. I was watching the game last week with my son Ryan, and after every play, the

announcer would say, “And there’s a huge play by so-and-so,” and we would look at each other and say, “Who?!” We had *no idea* who these guys were. The *good* players, the ones who get paid all the money and were *supposed* to be out there playing, were standing on the sidelines watching. And the ones who were supposed to be standing on the sidelines watching (or maybe even watching from *home!*) were out there on the field making the big plays and winning the game. The ones who were supposed to be *in* were *out*, and the ones who were supposed to be *out* were *in*.

And this is where it relates to the story today. Today is the holy day of Epiphany. (Actually, Epiphany is *tomorrow*, the twelfth day after Christmas, but we celebrate it together *today*.) This is the day when we celebrate the magi (the wise men) coming to find Jesus and bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The word *Epiphany* comes from the Greek word *epiphanaus*, which means, “to appear,” or “to reveal.” *That* comes from a word that means, “glorious” or, “glory.” *That* comes from a word that means, “to shine,” “to bring light,” or “to make visible.” So if you put all of that together, *Epiphany* has to do with the coming of light that reveals glory. When someone says, “I had an *epiphany*,” they are saying, “Something that wasn’t clear to me before, I can *see* it now.” It’s about something being *revealed*; the lights come on and you *get it*. Some kind of knowledge is made known to you. A mystery is revealed to you.

And what is being revealed on that first Epiphany 2,000 years ago is the glory of God in Jesus Christ. What is being *made known* in this story is that Jesus is the King of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. But here’s the thing. It’s not being revealed to the people on the *inside*, the ones who are *supposed* to get it. It’s being revealed to the people on the *outside*, the ones who *aren’t* supposed to get it.

There are two main players in this story: King Herod and the wise men. (We don't actually know how *many* wise men there were. We always sing about *three* of them, but scripture doesn't actually *say* how many there were. So we're just going to lump them all together as *one* of the main players in this story.) King Herod was the *insider*. He was the powerful Roman-backed ruler of the region. He was born in Israel, and he was Jewish. He was surrounded by the best advisors and Jewish religious leaders. If there was *anyone* to whom the glory of God should have been revealed, to whom the mystery of the Messiah of Israel should have been made known, it was Herod.

The magi (or wise men) were astrologers who came from the East, probably Persia (what we know today as Iran). Which is to say, they were not from Israel, and they were not Jewish. They were Gentiles. Outsiders. There was no reason they should have *known* or *cared* about the birth of the King of the Jews or the Messiah of Israel, because they weren't *from* Israel, and they weren't *Jewish*. And yet it is to *them* that the glory of God is revealed and this mystery is made known.

The one who was supposed to be *in*, King Herod, was watching all of this from the *outside*. And the ones who were supposed to be on the *outside* were the ones who saw Jesus face to face.

This is a theme that runs all throughout the life of Jesus. The people closest to him and the ones who *should* have understood who he was *didn't really get* who he was or what he was doing. The Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. His *disciples* didn't get him a lot of the time. His own *mother* and family, there are stories about how they think he's *crazy*, and they come to bring him back home. And yet these *other* people all throughout the gospels – Samaritans,

lepers, sinners, Gentiles, Romans, non-Jewish people – *they* seem to get what’s going on here. *Their* eyes were opened to the presence and the glory of God in their midst.

This is a theme that Paul picks up on in his letters, too, especially his letter to the Ephesians. Ephesus was a city in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). It was outside of Israel. The people who lived there were not Jewish. They were Gentiles. They were outsiders. And yet *they* had come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul writes to them that the mystery of Christ has been revealed to them, and that *they* – Gentiles, outsiders – have become *heirs*, members of the same body, sharing in the same promise as the people of Israel, through Jesus Christ.

It used to be that the promise of God, the love and blessing of God, the *kingdom* of God was limited to the Jewish people. Think of it like a city with a wall around it. Only the Jewish people were allowed inside. But in Jesus Christ, the gates to that city have been opened wide, and the whole world has been invited in to share in the promise and the love and the blessing of God *with* the people of Israel.

The *mystery* that is being revealed in Christ – we see it in Paul and in the story of the wise men – is that those on the “outside” belong to God, are loved by God, and are a part of God’s family. Paul says that this has been made known to the Church so that the Church can make it known to the *world*. So that we can proclaim the good news that there are no “outsiders.” The promise and love and blessing of God is for *all* people. Our job is to help others *see* it and *experience* it and *live into it*; not to serve as gate keepers, but to stand at the doors – at the gates to the Kingdom of God – and invite *everyone* in to join the celebration. The calling of the church is to say to the world, “The promise of God is for *you*. The love of God is for *you*. The blessing of God is for *you*. Jesus Christ is *for you*.”

God is revealed to the world today *through* the life of the church. But *not* in a way that says, “We have God and you don’t. We’re the insiders and you’re the outsiders.” God is revealed in us as we live and practice our faith in ways that show *humility* and in ways that make *peace* and work for *justice* and practice *forgiveness* and live in *love*. The glory of God in Jesus Christ is revealed through us when we live the life of Christ in the world.

The question that this forces us to ask is, “Who do *we* think of as being *outside* the love and blessing of God today?” Who in this world and in our lives do we look at and think, “Not them. I don’t see any evidence of the presence or glory of God in *their* life. The love and the blessing and the favor of God is not for *them*. They are a *mess*, or they believe the exact *opposite* of everything that *I* believe, or they drive me *crazy*, or they’re just a little too *different*, they don’t do things the way that I think they *should* be done, or they’re too *liberal*, or they’re too *conservative*, or they’re *Jewish* or *Muslim* or *atheist* or *immigrants* or *poor* or *addicts*.”

Who do we look at today as *outsiders*? Maybe God is actually calling *them* to be a part of this story with us. Maybe God is calling us to open our *eyes* and our *minds* and our *hearts* and our *doors* to *them*, so that the glory and love and blessing and presence of Christ can be revealed to them *through us*; so that through *our* love and acceptance, they might come to know *God’s* love and acceptance. Maybe God is saying to *us*, as God said through the prophet Isaiah in the words that are on the cover of our bulletin, “Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you.” As we enter this new year, how will we reach out to those on the *outside* and welcome them in to the love and blessing and story of God, the way that *we* were welcomed in through Jesus Christ.