

The Welcoming Face of God
By Larry Augsburger
Matthew 2:1-12
January 4, 2009

- I. Our scripture for today paints a glorious picture with these mysterious kingly figures showing up to worship and give gifts to the newly born Christ child.
- A. Now in order to pull everything together into one neat little tableau, we often place the Magi at the stable, but truth is that they likely arrived some time later.
1. I remember how distressed I was as a child when my father told me that the wise men most likely were not at the stable there that night.
 - a. In my mind they saw the star over Bethlehem as the baby was born and bopped on over, arriving shortly after the shepherds.
 - b. I mean after all, our manger scene had three stately, tall, kingly characters in it—plus a camel!—wasn't that proof?
 2. I insisted that they had to have been at the stable. It ruined the story—it ruined the whole manger scene—if they weren't there.
- B. But my seven year-old insistence notwithstanding, it is highly likely that the Magi were not at the stable and that this scene of their worshipping the Christ child and giving him gifts probably happened in a house some time—perhaps a year or more—after Jesus was born.
1. So I want us to imagine a humble Palestinian one-room dwelling as the scene for the events of this passage.
 2. And I want us to imagine the stir it caused in Mary and Joseph when these Magi showed up.
 - a. In those days life in a Palestinian village would have been very quiet, boring, bland, colorless and humdrum.
 - b. And suddenly to have a retinue like this show up at the door would have been an incredible shock.
- C. Now technically, Joseph should have barred the door to these Magi.
1. After all they were pagan gentile astrologers. They represented all that the Jewish nation stood against.
 2. But instead Joseph welcomed them.
 - a. He welcomed them to worship his son.
 - b. He welcomed them to give their gifts and tell their story.
- II. And this opens to us the last topic of our Advent/Christmas series on the face of God—God's face is a welcoming face.
- A. That God's face is a welcoming face had been only partially true in the OT era.
1. Now it was true for the Jews. God turned a welcoming face toward them.
 2. But it was not true for anyone else—the mass group of people who came to be defined as Gentiles. There was no welcome in God for them.
 3. God had established the Hebrews as an exclusive nation—they were to exclude all who *were not Jews*.
 - a. We see this set-apartness in *Leviticus 20:26 You are to be*

holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

- b. We see the call to separate themselves from other people in *Joshua 23:7 Do not associate with these nations that remain among you.*
 - c. And we see an instance of their actually implementing this in *Nehemiah 13:3 When the people heard (the law of Moses), they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.*
 - d. In the OT God presented a quite unwelcoming face to anyone who was not a Jew.
4. But even as Israel worked to exclude those who weren't Jews, there was significant evidence that God was planning to welcome a lot more people.
- a. *Isaiah spoke of the Messiah in 60:1-2, Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*
 - (1) Now this was something that brightened the hearts of Israel –this word that God was going to rise upon them.
 - (2) This was confirmation of their exclusivity.
 - b. But then, in contradiction to that, Isaiah says in v. 3, *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*
 - (1) This verse says that the brightness of this dawn is not exclusively for the benefit if Israel.
 - (2) God is going to welcome others to the brightness also.
 - c. And when the *Psalmist speaks of the Messiah in Psalm 72 he says, with an uncomfortable inclusivity, The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.*
 - (1) So much for Israel's exclusivity.
 - (2) There was an unusual degree of welcome in these words.
 - d. There are other passages that contain this same hint of welcome.
 - (1) They speak of people other than Jews coming to salvation.
 - (2) But the Jews largely ignored these passages.

- (3) In their minds no people other than Jews were welcome.
- B. But with the coming of Jesus the face of God put on a welcoming glow that reached far beyond Israel.
1. We saw it already in the Magi scene as gentile astrologers came to worship
 2. And we see in Jesus an inclusivity and welcome that clearly doesn't fit with Jewish expectations.
 - a. In Matthew 24:14 he says, *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.*
 - b. In Matthew 28:19 he commissions his disciples to *...make disciples of all nations.*
 - c. And in Acts 1:8, just before he ascends, he says, *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*
 - (1) His saying *and to the ends of the earth* means that his welcome spreads far broader than the Jews could imagine.
 - (2) And worse yet, his including *Samaria* means even their worst enemies are included in the party.
 - d. Jesus's welcome was extremely broad and inclusive, even including the hated Samaritans.
 3. And then we see the welcoming face of God in Jesus's call of Paul.
 - a. Acts 9:15 reports, *The Lord said to Ananias, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles.*
 - b. In Ephesians 3 Paul describes his mission in these terms, *This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*
 - c. Paul was God's face of welcome beaming toward Gentiles.
 4. A chapter later in Acts 10 we see God's welcoming face breaking down Peter's resistance to accepting Gentiles in his experience with Cornelius, leading him to say, *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him.*
- C. We catch glimpses of God's welcoming face in the OT, despite the exclusivity of the Jews, and then his welcoming face absolutely glows through the pages of NT.

- III. Now there's a problem here in the fact that the Bible's chief way of expressing God's welcoming face is in terms of people groups.
- A. It speaks of kings, and nations, and Gentiles and Samaritans.
1. But that's not the way in which we modern people think of welcome.
 2. It's a given in our minds that God accepts people from all around world.
 3. And we tend to think of welcome much more in an individual sense.
 - a. Does God include me in his welcome?
 - b. Does God include that person, with those traits, or that person, with that behavior, in his welcome?
 4. We think of God's welcoming face in different terms than the ones we find in the Bible.
- B. And I'm going to suggest today that there are two special things of which we modern people need to be reminded when we think of God's wonderful welcome.
- C. These two things are:
1. First, that we are agents of God's welcome.
 - a. Paul was an agent of God's welcome to the Gentiles.
 - b. But we are agents of welcome to anyone and everyone we see.
 2. And the second thing of which we modern people need to be reminded is how welcome we are as individuals.
- D. Let's look first at this issue of being agents of God's welcome.
1. Jesus commissions us as agents of God's welcoming face as he says *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*
 2. There are two ways in which we welcome people.
 - a. First there's the welcome of evangelism in which we are the greeters of the kingdom, inviting others in, instructing them in the ways of kingdom life and turning them into brothers and sisters.
 - (1) Now this task is always a challenge.
 - (2) Not having been brought up in a Christian environment those we are to welcome value things we don't value and bring influences we don't care for.
 - (a) With one couple I shepherded into Oak Grove, he brought his fond memories of being Army Ranger.
 - (b) And she brought her love of what, to me, was dreadful music.
 - (c) I was most grateful that I was out of town the night that the concert she sponsored packed the pews and drew the first ever complaints about noise from the neighbors.
 - (3) Evangelism is always a challenge because God's welcome generally tends to be quite a bit broader than ours.

- people can realize how welcome they are in the estimation of God.
4. The second implication of the fact that God has a welcoming face is that we are welcome.
 - a. No matter who we are, no matter what we have done, no matter what has been done to us, we are worthy and we are welcome.
 - b. In the NT story it was important for the Gentiles to come to realize that about themselves.
 - c. And now, in today's world, it is important for all of us, no matter what we have experienced in life to realize we are welcome.
- IV. So the lesson of the welcoming face of God is that all people are welcome.
- A. If we go to the pages of the Bible we find there that although at first God welcomed only one family, which he made into a nation, in the NT he widened his welcome to include all nations.
 - B. The lesson for today is that God welcomes all people to his salvation and rest.
 - C. And the implications for us today are:
 1. First, that we are agents of that welcome.
 2. And second, that we need to realize how welcome we are.
 - D. For God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to eternal life.