

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-23
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 January 6, 2013

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE - "The Tale of Three Trees"

ADULT MESSAGE

I am sixty years old. Lord willing, I may live another 10, 20, 30 or at most 40 years. Jesus says that **not a sparrow falls** to the ground without God knowing about it and that we are worth a lot more than the sparrows. What therefore is my **life worth**? What **pathways** await me? What is **God hoping will happen** in **my life**? In the lives of **those around me**? What **provision has God made** for my life and for my following of Jesus? And how about you? **What is God doing in your life?**

In the current movie, "**Les Miserables**" I heard the phrase, "**To love another person is to see the face of God.**" Do you believe that? It sounds a little like Matthew 25 where Jesus tells his followers that whenever they visit the sick, feed the hungry, etc., that they are doing it to Jesus. "**To love another person is to see the face of God.**"

On New Year's Eve television, I saw **Beyonce** sing "**I Was Here.**" Please watch and listen to this short song with me now. Some of the memorable lyrics that struck me go like this:

**I want to say I lived each day,
 Until I die
 And know that I meant something in somebody's life
 The hearts I've touched,
 Will be the proof that I leave
 That I made a difference
 And this world will see**

The chorus goes like this:

**I was here...
 I lived, I loved
 I was here...
 I did, I've done, everything that I wanted
 And it was more than I thought it would be
 I leave my mark so everyone will know
 I was here...**

This video reflected **Beyonce** singing in front of all kinds of world scenes of **struggle, need and hope**. **Did you see God's face there any place?** I don't know this woman's story. She may contribute lots of time and money to important causes around the world. I hope that she is making a wonderful difference. Unlike Beyonce, **we** may not be **hopeful of having the world remember us** after we are gone. I personally am **more hopeful that somehow my life, decisions and actions will right now be in harmony with God's will** to love, care for and save the world one person at a time.

In "**The Tale of Three Trees**" that I read to our kids, one tree becomes the manger that helps bring Jesus into our world. The second tree becomes the strong boat that he uses to carry his disciples safely through stormy waters. The last tree became the cross that lifted Jesus high above the earth in suffering and death to bring life and salvation/wholeness to every person. What sort of a tree are you? Tomorrow, will you use your gold, frankincense or myrrh to **welcome Jesus** into our world, to **worship** the King of Life, to **carry God's love and compassion** into your day?

In our Gospel text for today, **God's own people**, in the holy city of Jerusalem were **clueless** about the coming of the newborn king, Son of God. **Strangers, foreigners**, informed by a heavenly phenomenon, traveled for perhaps months, camels or not, to find and worship (pay homage) to Jesus, king of the Jews. The star showed them that something wonderful had happened, but they **needed to learn from God's word**, the scriptures, as to who, what, when and where. **We're still learning...**

Our text reveals the best and worst of human reactions to Jesus' coming. **Non-Jews, Persians, star-gazers** are drawn to Jesus and upon finding him are filled with **joy, worship** (homage) him and leave precious **gifts of thanksgiving**. Meanwhile, we have **wicked King Herod** who had killed three of his own sons in order to stay in power. Herod, upon learning of the birth of a new king, is **fearful, seeks to kill Jesus** and eventually **massacres every boy** age two or younger in Bethlehem. Sounds like today's world too...

God comes into our world as a vulnerable child, probably a toddler at this point, in order to save all children. **How ironic** then that all of those **innocent little children were killed** while God, wise men, Mary and Joseph saved Jesus the infant. **Then Jesus the innocent adult, Son of**

God, was killed to save all the little children everywhere and forever. The baby was born, time passed, the wise men arrived, worshiped and gave gifts. Then both Joseph and the wise men were given **Godly visions** warning of Herod's evil intent. **Wise men** headed for home (likely Iraq) by a route avoiding Herod and Jerusalem. **Mary and Joseph** packed up Jesus, gifts and headed for Egypt, a traditional place of refuge and rescue for the Jews.

Centuries before Jewish scripture had spoken of a **star** rising out of Israel (Numbers 24:17.) It spoke of **nations being drawn to the light** (Isaiah 60:3.) It promised **gifts of gold and frankincense** being brought on camels (Isaiah 60:6.) It spoke of **Bethlehem being the birthplace** of a **shepherd king** (Micah 5:1, 3; II Samuel 5:2.)

You've seen the old bumper sticker, "**Wise men still follow the star.**" What do you think? Is that saying true? Is there a **light shining in your world**? Has Jesus, the Light of the World, been **born into your life and world**? Is Jesus making a **difference in your life and world**?

Did you see the story about football player Jason Avant in the paper (Brainerd Dispatch, 12/26/2012?) It is entitled, "**Avant rose from gang life to be a man of Christ.**" The article starts out, "**Jason Avant raises his hands to the sky every reception in celebration of much more than catching a ball.**" The paper quotes him, "**When I lift my hands up, it's me saying 'Lord, I know where I could be and I thank you for where I am...**" In a nutshell, Avant was raised by his grandmother, in poverty, in a home with a dozen other relatives, drug sales and gun fire. He started selling drugs at age 12. He went to elementary school drunk and high. He was in the **Gangsters Disciples** gang in Chicago, "**dodging bullets and running from police.**" Throughout all of this his grandmother and aunt continued to love and care for him, pray for him. Grandma prayed, "**Lord, let him be different. Let his life change.**" Jason ended up living in several different homes with several different caregivers. He now says that "**sports and prayer helped him to stay free from harm.**"

Jason Avant was given a football scholarship to play for **Michigan**. His roommate was a pastor's son. Both young men started out their college career focused upon living it up and having fun. The roommate, pastor's son, sustained an injury just before his sophomore year and decided that he ought to start going to church again. Jason went with him, every week

for two months. Then during one particular sermon **Jason saw images from his life start flashing before his eyes.** From that day forward, Jason ‘stopped drinking, partying, and even waited to have sex again until he was married.’ He began “**studying the Bible as if it were his playbook.**” Jason Avant now plays for the **Philadelphia Eagles.** Around the locker room he sings gospel music, carries his Bible, leads a weekly study and “**quotes scripture the way movie buffs recite lines to their favorite movie.**”

“**Movies?**” Did you see the movie “**Les Miserables?**” “**To love another person is to see the face of God.**” I think that statement is true. I think that **God loved wise men, Mary and Joseph, Jason Avant, Jason’s grandma and aunt – and they all got to see the face of God.** I think that you’ve seen the face of God. I think that we have seen the face of God and just like the wise men; we’ve been **drawn to this place** where the Light of the World shines. And just like the wise men, we’ve **experienced joy,** offered **our worship and praise** and **shared precious gifts.** And just like the wise men, **God has been using us to love, care for and save the children of our world.**

In the next couple of weeks, God’s people here in this faith community will be **deciding how to follow Jesus.** We will be deciding who our **new leaders** will be. We will be deciding in **which direction God is calling us** to follow Jesus. We will be **committing to sharing our own precious gifts of time and ability** to strengthen this faith community and the outreach of God’s people gathered here through First Lutheran Church in Aitkin, Minnesota. **God’s hopes and dreams for our future are good.**

Two thousand years ago, some folks **gathered** around the Light of the World, **worshipped, shared precious gifts** and then **scattered to make a Godly difference** in the world. May the same be true of us, you and me. **Thanks be to God** for the **blessings** we have known in the **past year.** May God **continue to bless, empower and guide us** in the year ahead. **And may we be trusting and faithful.** Thanks be to God. Amen.