

“The Gift Manifested”

6 January 2019: Epiphany Sunday
Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571
Preaching Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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**“Genuine beginnings begin within us,
even when they are brought to our attention by external opportunities” (William Bridges).**

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We start a new year with good aims for self-discipline. The Magi in Matthew are Persian astrologers, who by discipline find Jesus the Messiah. The Magi had a logical pattern to find Jesus. Hear our lesson about disciplined self-control:

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:1-12).

The Magi were on a quest. They were searching for “the child who has been born king of the Jews.” The Magi were not employing a “grid search” a multiple overlapping technique which, as we see on television, cuts across a crime scene. Rather, the Magi follow a star and ask questions in order to find baby Jesus. A new year, finding Jesus, and discipline all nicely dovetail on 2019’s first Sunday.

Many medical centers, shopping malls, and free-standing buildings have an area within named “Wellness Center” or “Fitness Center.” A fitness/wellness center is where more discipline occurs for people today than elsewhere. Many establishments have fitness as their primary purpose and have revealing names: “Curves,” “Body Works,” “Total Workout,” “Anytime Fitness,” “24 Hour Fitness,” “L A Fitness” and “Busy Bodies.” Physical fitness routines are as close as many people get to authentic discipline. Hear Hebrews address discipline:

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at

the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. [12] Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, [13] and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed (Hebrews 12:7, 11-13).

Hebrews is not trying to furnish a full-blown theological explanation of suffering, trials, or affliction. Rather, Hebrews places the human endurance of suffering into perspective. In fact, the writer employs the image of endurance to make the concept discipline clearer. The writer uses parental discipline of a child to stress God's discipline for us. If we accept the discipline of our human parents, then how much more should we accept God's discipline?

Hebrews takes this "discipline" idea and uses a classic Greek rhetorical argument. We call this argument from "the lesser to the greater." Jesus uses this argument in Luke. Jesus reasons: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:11-13)? As parental discipline is brief, God's divine discipline endures.

Surely, discipline and a New Year seem closely linked. On the year's first Sabbath, we often renew our faith and in various ways. Some do it with formal resolutions; others note to do better. Some UMs employ "The Wesleyan Covenant Service."

Discipline always seems painful at the time, but later it yields righteousness as a fruit of discipline. The argument suggests that discipline eventually leads to healing. Many doctors/physical therapists/pastors can predict which elderly patients will respond to rehabilitation and which ones will not. Those with willpower and discipline will prosper; those without will not thrive. Often, discipline involves pain, but as this text reminds its readers: "what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed" (Hebrews 12:13). Thus, discipline's pain promotes good physical and spiritual health. Discipline is an individual's ability to do as Stephen Covey suggests: "putting first things first." The first things are the things that promote health and wholeness in our lives. It is to this end that discipline aims.

Yet . . . the discipline of self-mastery we urge on ourselves includes actions that we are not naturally inclined to do. We call this inertia in physics. One definition of inertia: "objects at rest tend to remain at rest until acted on by an outside force." When I was a child, I could play basketball from early in the morning until late in the afternoon and still have enough energy to argue about my bedtime. Yet, when my mother annually took me shopping, I was exhausted and dead legged after an hour.

We require self-mastery to change inertia—to get us moving in a positive direction. Commonly, self-discipline is not a heroic once in a lifetime effort. Instead, discipline is a series of constant, consistent habits of doing the right things the right way over time. This particular condition is the heart of discipline. As M. Scott Peck writes, "Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems" (*The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*, compiled by Martin H. Manser, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001, p. 77). Spiritual discipline is what Christians do to put themselves in God's arena. Perhaps this is why John Wesley so frequently addressed the spiritual disciplines.

In the Wesleyan bands and classes (small groups intended to cultivate spiritual disciplines) the question believers asked was this: "How is it with your soul?" Mr. Wesley saw community as vital to spiritual disciplines. Among these disciplines: Bible study, prayer, worship, fasting, meditation, and works of service. Richard

Foster defined spiritual discipline as: “The detachment from the confusion all around us is in order to have a richer attachment to God” (*Celebration of Discipline*, 2nd ed. [Harper, 1988], p.21).

A disciple is a learner. We learn from the disciplines we impose on ourselves—and for the less mature, from the discipline others impose on us. Perhaps it is our parents, or from this Hebrews’ passage—God. But could our discipline be from the law, or a policies and procedures manual, or even promises we make to one another? Each of these modes of discipline helps us to become the person God and we want ourselves to be. But to begin we need a community to encourage us into the spiritual disciplines.

In college, my roommate was an avid runner. He ran every morning. He thought it was a good discipline for his health—at least for the first month of college. Soon, however, he fell out of his good habit. One morning about 6:30 another jogger knocked on our dorm room. Our roommate explained, “I could not get myself out of bed anymore, so my buddy promised he would come by and get me. Now I am back in the habit.” Other people can help us get and keep disciplined. If we ever need a reminder of one of the foundational characteristics of abundant life, then think fondly for a change about “discipline.”

The Magi in our story are Persian astrologers, who by discipline find Jesus the Messiah. The Magi had a logical, disciplined pattern to find Jesus. They watched the stars and they listened to people’s response to their questions. May we all find some discipline this new year! Amen.

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