

Matthew 2:1-12
“A Jesus We All Can Touch”

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Would you believe me if I told you that I’ve been working up to this sermon for a year now? It’s true. Ever since my mother, about a year ago, gave me a clipping from a website she subscribes to. You know the kind. Some people get a recipe a day to their inbox, others get a ding to their phone every morning at 7 a.m. providing them with a synopsis of whatever news came about in the world overnight. I subscribe to a website that sends me a daily reflection from Father Richard Rohr—2 paragraphs of daily wisdom for the aspiring monk. I don’t know what website my mother got this from, but it was a story about a 3-year old girl who was helping her father unpack the Christmas decorations one year. The father was up in the attic searching for a child-friendly fabric nativity set they had, because the only other nativity set the family had belonged to his late grandmother. It was made of porcelain, and the father didn’t want it to get broken by toddler hands. Up in the attic, he got distracted, when a few minutes later he heard from down below, “Daddy, have you found a Jesus I can touch?”

A Jesus I can touch. I don’t know about you, but if I had to sum up what it is that I come back to this place for week after week, year after year, it would be to find a Jesus I can touch.

Of course, the great truth of this season is that this is exactly what we get. In the baby born in Bethlehem, the God of all creation comes asking us, crying for us, to put our hands all over him. To pick him up, to snuggle him, to kiss him, to feed him, to sing to him, to put him right against our skin, to touch him, and to declare, you are light of light, very God of very God, come down to us. And of course, like all great truths, it also great mystery, and like all mystery, the incarnation of God in Jesus is not always, and sometimes never, easy to see, let alone to touch.

What we are fundamentally talking about this morning is what does God look like. Assuming for the moment that you believe in the existence of God, what does God look like to you?

The ancient Greeks believed in the existence of not just one god but of many, with each god having a different look, personality, and role in the universe, and no two gods being equal. Naturally then, they also believed in a universe where the gods are in competition with one another, tending as much towards disorder as to order. In Greek mythology, god never enters into relationship with humanity without always keeping the upper hand, without always maintaining just enough distance to keep us guessing. Will Zeus throw down a lightning bolt? Will Poseidon stir up the sea and wipe us out with a tidal wave? Will Aphrodite cause love to betray us? In such a world, god is behind everything, but never seen. God is the explanation for everything, but god never provides explanation for anything.

It reminds me of a scene in Acts 17. The Apostle Paul is in Athens, the epicenter of philosophical and theological thought. In Athens, every other person has PhD after their name. And yet Paul notices that they have this great statue, on which is written the inscription: "To the God Nobody Knows." Paul turns to the philosophers and doctors and asks, "Are you good this, with a god made of stone that nobody knows? What's that like to touch?" Is this what your God looks like?

On the other hand, some 800 years after the Apostle Paul in Greece, the philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx wrote from Germany, that man "went looking for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the reflection of himself."¹ Marx's argument was that God may be nothing more than a mere projection of our own selves—of our hopes, our pain, and most of all, our selfish pride—and religion nothing more than an opioid we have created to make ourselves feel better about being us. Want to

¹ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Collected Works*, 40 vols. (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1976), p. 182.

know what God looks like? Look in a mirror. Like what you see there? That's God. Don't like what you see? That's God.

Too many churches seem to live only on one side of the same mirror. We show up and the preacher tells us, "You're great, God loves you just the way you are." Or, the preacher tells us, "You're terrible and need to change everything." Promise me that if you ever feel all we are doing here on Sunday mornings is just picking up and putting down mirrors, you'll call me out. For I believe very much in the words of Stanley Hauerwas, who said, "The task of the church is to cultivate a people who can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being gentle among those who admire the tough, risk love when it may not be returned, because we have confidence in the God who will not rest until all things are made new."

Personally, I've always favored what John Muir once said about God. Muir, who might best be described as a naturalist and conservationist, and who inspired President Teddy Roosevelt to establish places like Yosemite and the Grand Canyon as National Parks, said, "I'd rather be in the mountains thinking of God, than in church thinking about the mountains." The Psalmist agrees, "I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from God, who made heaven and earth." What does God look like? See the mountains!

I wonder if the wise men could see the shadow of the mountains on the night they saw the star over Bethlehem. They'd never seen a star like this one before, so they knew it meant something special was going on—a baby was being born king of the Jews. The people whose ancestors had been exploited and exiled by foreign kings, are now getting a king of their own. This was something special indeed, deserving only of the finest gifts they have to give. They arrive in Bethlehem and present Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I would guess that some of us have seen the cartoon featuring the 3 wise women. They arrive in Bethlehem just after the 3 wise men and present Jesus with formula, diapers, and casserole dishes. And every parent who has ever been thinks, that's more like it.

If you don't mind, though, I'd like to give you my theory on the wise men and why they chose to give Jesus such fine and expensive gifts, and I should probably add that this theory hasn't been tested or proved.

Is it that they simply don't know any better? They're rich and out-of-touch with reality, and gold, frankincense, and myrrh is all they know? Or maybe they just want to make absolutely clear how great Jesus is. The old hymn, "*We Three Kings of Orient Are*," proclaims that these gifts are nothing less than a projection of things to come for Jesus. And maybe that is it. But what if it's more than all this? What if, what if, arriving in Bethlehem and meeting Jesus, they realize they just can't hold onto so much wealth anymore? Matthew tells us these wise men are from the east, which means they, like the Jews, and Jesus himself, are foreigners in a strange land. Back home they hold the seat of power and privilege. Back home they work hard every day to stay at the top. Back home they don't have to be concerned with who's at the bottom—how they got there, and why they can't seem to get out of there.

Except these wise men are concerned. Years of looking up at the stars has kept them from fashioning too small of a worldview, from forgetting that, according to the stars, we all live at the bottom. So when they see a star they've never seen before, they can't ignore it. Even if it will cost them all their power and privilege, all their expensive finery, they have to follow it.

And this is how I'd like to think Jesus winds up getting all the wise men's gold, frankincense, and myrrh, not because he needs it and they can afford to give it to him, but because they themselves can't afford to keep it anymore. They walk into a stable underneath the light of a star to meet the God of all creation and discover Mary and Joseph, and a poor baby who needs to be fed, clothed, and rocked safely to sleep.

"Here," they drop their riches on the ground beside Mary and Joseph, not really caring what they do with them now, as they reach out with their own two empty hands to do the only

thing any of us ever need to do if we want to have a merry Christmas. “Can we...? I mean, is it true, this is what love looks like? Is this really all peace on earth requires? It’s so fragile, yet so tough. So accessible, yet so disarming. And it’s not at all as impossible as we thought it would be. Can we...Mary would you mind if we...touch your baby?”

I don’t know, if you were Mary and Joseph and the love of Jesus was yours to hold, would you let other people touch it? Would you share it? Oh wait, the love of Jesus is yours to share. Amen.