

“Epiphany & Hope for Evangelism”
Matthew 2:1-12
January 7, 2024
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning we recognize the Christian holiday of Epiphany, which occurred yesterday, on January 6th.

Coming right after the twelve days of Christmas, Epiphany is a time where the Church shifts its focus from the coming of Christ to the revelation of who Christ is. That revelation is intimately tied up with the themes of Christmas, which is why our Christmas decorations have remained up for this one more Sunday, as we consider the theme of Epiphany.

There are several moments in the gospels where Christ’s identity is revealed in special ways. On Epiphany, the Eastern Church has historically focused on the baptism of Christ. The Western Church has historically emphasized the coming of the Magi, which marked the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. Other passages have also been considered in connection with this theme.

But this year, we will return to that traditional text of the Western church: the coming of the Magi.

With that in mind, we turn to Matthew 2:1-12.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Matthew writes:

^{2:1} Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, like the psalmist, our soul clings to the dust,
and we ask you to give us life according to your word!
Teach us your ways,
help us understand your precepts,
make us to meditate on your works.
When our souls melt for sorrow,
strengthen us according to your word.
Help us to cling to your testimonies,
and enlarge our hearts,
that we may run in your ways.
In Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:25-32]

Introduction

There's a lot in this text. And a lot we could say about it. But this morning I want to focus on what this text, and the theme of Epiphany have to teach us about how we think about evangelism in a hostile culture.

Because I think that when it comes to telling others about Jesus – when it comes to evangelism – Epiphany, and our text this morning, offer us hope where we may struggle with hopelessness.

Our Evangelistic Hopelessness

And many of us do struggle with hopelessness when it comes to evangelism – when it comes to pointing non-Christians to Jesus Christ. And it's no mystery why.

Jim Davis and Michael Graham, who have carried out extensive research in this area, have estimated that in the last 25 years, 40 million adults who used to go to church at least once a month now go to church less than once a year. They call this movement “the Great Dechurching” and they argue that in terms of percentage of the American population, this is the fastest religious shift in American history. Previously, the fastest religious shift in church attendance in American history – faster even than the shifts during the Great Awakenings – was a shift of 12% of the American population into the Church over 25 years, following the Civil War. But the dechurching of the past 25 years represents a shift of almost 16% of the US population out of the church, making it the fastest religious shift in our nation's history. It's even more shocking in terms of raw numbers. Davis and Graham make the case that more Americans have left the church in the last 25 years, than all the Americans that became Christians in the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and the Billy Graham crusades combined. [Davis, et al., xxii-5]

Now ... while those specific numbers may be new to some of us, the overall trend is not news to most people – we see it all around us.

And that pattern has led many Christians to feel hopeless about the spread of the gospel and efforts in evangelism. After all, there's not exactly a lot of success stories we see around us.

The emotional expression of that hopelessness can take different forms. For some – especially older Christians – it can take the form of shock and bewilderment. To others, who had once expected revival but have not yet seen it, it can take the form of cynicism. Still for others it can take the form of apathetic pessimism.

The emotions of that hopelessness can vary. But then, so also can the next steps we take in the face of the evangelistic hopelessness we may feel.

Some of us respond to those feelings of hopelessness with nostalgia. We lament the day we live in and we long for the past. But Carl Truman, a historian and conservative Presbyterian in the OPC responds to that impulse with this – he writes: “It is truly very hard for any competent historian to be nostalgic. What past times were better than the present? An era before antibiotics when childbirth or even minor cuts might lead to septicemia and death? The great days of the nineteenth century when the church was culturally powerful, and marriage was between one man and one woman for life, but little children worked in factories and swept chimneys? Perhaps the Great Depression? The Second World War? The era of Vietnam? Every age has had its darkneses and its dangers.” he writes. “The task of the Christian is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them.” [Truman, 30]

Well put.

Others tend to respond to their feelings of evangelistic hopelessness not with historical nostalgia, but with present-day retreat from the culture – withdrawing, putting up walls, imagining an idealized monastic-like life. But it’s hard to square such an approach to the Christian life with the Great Commission in which our Lord sent us out to the unbelieving world.

Others, who reject the impulse to flight, instead embrace the impulse to fight: they adopt a militant mindset for the Christian life, and decide to go to battle with the culture. But the brash combativeness of this approach often seems quite distant from the attitude of compassion and kindness that we see Christ and the Apostles exhibit towards non-believers.

Still others respond to the situation by simply trying to blend in with the culture around us – to minimize their differences, to get along with people, and to downplay their faith. But such an approach fails to recognize that God calls his people to stand out and be different.

Nostalgia ... retreat ... attack ... blending in ... do you see any of those tendencies in yourself?

They look very different from each other. They each have some truth in them. But at root they all share a hopelessness about the spread of the gospel, and a setting aside of the call to evangelism – the call to tell others of Jesus, and to seek to make disciples for Christ of those around us, with the expectation that the Lord might bring real fruit from our efforts.

We tend to lack that expectation – that hope.

Which is why it is so important for us to see how Epiphany in general, and our text in particular, both offer hope for evangelism.

They offer us hope, because they remind us that our God is a God who actively reveals himself to others.

More specifically, what we see in our text is that the Lord is actively revealing himself to non-Christians. And then, with that, we see that he also carries that work out through his Church, in spite of his Church, and towards salvation.

And that's what we'll consider this morning.

I. The Lord Is Actively Revealing Himself to Non-Christians

The first thing for us to see – and really the central thing I want us to reflect on this morning – is that the Lord is actively revealing himself to non-Christians.

We serve a God who is already at work, often in ways we don't see or know about, revealing himself to non-Christians.

And we see this play out in our text with the Magi and the star.

In verse one, these Magi – these wise men – from the east, show up, seemingly out of nowhere. There's a lot we don't know about the Magi. But there are a few things we do know. First, we know that they were not Jews – they were Gentiles. So they were outsiders to God's covenant people. Second, they weren't from the nearby orbit of Judea, but they came from far off – from the East. Third, they weren't studying the Hebrew Scriptures, but their focus was on the world around them – the term Magi could mean wise men, or even “magicians” or “astrologers.” Taken together, what we do know for sure is that these Magi were outsiders to the people of God. But then they suddenly show up among God's people. [Green, 66; Wright, 11; Leithart, 70]

Further explanation is given in verse two – they explain that they are seeking one who was born the king of the Jews, because they saw his star when it rose, and they have come to worship him. They saw a star ... somehow knew that it pointed to a King among the Jews whose importance extended beyond Israel, even to them ... and they showed up to worship him.

Now, many theories have been raised about the nature of the star itself – whether it was a natural phenomenon that God used providentially [Green, 69; Wright, 10] or a miraculous star-like manifestation from God [Leithart, 70]. At the end of the day, we're not told exactly how God revealed himself to the Magi and led them to Jesus ... but what we are told is that he did.

Apart from any action by God's people, God, unbeknownst to Israel, was already at work, drawing non-believers to himself. That is one of the realities we celebrate at Epiphany – that God reveals himself to people – even to those who are spiritually far off from him.

God does that in an unusual way here in our text. But the Bible also tells us that God reveals himself through ordinary means, every day, to every human being on this earth. The Apostle Paul puts it so strongly, that he says of all people that: “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” [Romans 1:19] That's a strong statement. Though he may not be using a star, even today, the God of the Bible is pointing non-believers to himself. That is a truth we need to remember at Epiphany. And it's a truth that should encourage us when it comes to evangelism.

It should encourage us when it comes to evangelism because it means that anything is possible.

Look – I'm not stupid. I see the trajectory that the Church and our culture are on. And I'm not claiming to know things are about to turn around in the immediate future. But I also don't know that it won't. And that's kind of the point – I don't know what will happen next. And you don't

either. Human prophecies of revival and human prophecies of doom are equally foolish and arrogant. Because, as our text reminds us, God is at work in ways we don't see, doing things we don't expect.

In the first century, suffering under Roman oppression, culturally fractured between tribes of legalism, tribes of syncretistic compromise, and tribes of political idolatry and violence, first-century Israel was a mess. Things did not look good. And my guess is that at that moment, no Jew in Israel expected Gentile wise men to just show up in Jerusalem, earnestly seeking to worship the Messiah of Israel. But that's what happened. Gentiles showed up to pledge themselves to the Messiah of Israel. In years that followed more and more would. Eventually even the Emperor of Rome himself would do so. But it started with the Magi. And it started because God was at work among unbelievers in ways God's people did not know about. And when God is at work, anything is possible.

And the same is true today.

The Church in the West may continue its decline. The Church in the West may suddenly grow through revival. Or something else might happen altogether. But whatever fruit God decides to bring about, our text reminds us that in all sorts of ways God is at work among non-believers.

And that should encourage not just our overall attitude, but it should also encourage our commitment to personal evangelism.

Already, without you doing anything, the Lord has placed non-believers in your life, and all around you. Some of them seem far off. Maybe they seem engrossed in other things that appear to be contrary to God. And you don't know how to reach them. But that would have been how the Magi probably looked to the Jews – far off, engrossed in other things. But then the Lord revealed himself to them, he got their attention, and suddenly they show up in Jerusalem seeking Jesus.

Maybe some of the non-Christians in your life are openly hostile to Christianity. Maybe they hate it. And you have little hope for their hearts changing. But that was how Paul would have looked to the first Christians – angry, antagonistic, hating the Christian faith. But then the Lord revealed himself to Paul, he got Paul's attention, and suddenly Paul was showing up from city to city serving and preaching about Jesus.

This is not an uncommon pattern for God. Of course he does not do this in the life of every unbeliever. But he does do it in the lives of some. And we never know when or where or with whom he will do it. He could do it with anyone. And that should give us hope. It should encourage us to continue to be a light in the lives of non-Christians – to continue to pray for them, to continue to speak truth to them, to continue to believe that the Lord can draw them to himself.

But we might wonder: How is God at work in the lives of non-believers? How is he revealing himself to them?

There are so many answers to that question that it's worthy of a sermon series in itself. There are external ways the Lord is revealing himself to non-Christians and internal ways. Cognitive and pre-cognitive ways. Ways that point to various aspects of God's nature. Ways that come through creation and ways that come through history.

But as we think about the non-Christians around us, let me give five examples of how God often points non-Christians to himself internally – in their hearts and their inner worlds.

These five ways come from Johan Bavinck – the nephew of Herman Bavinck – and they’ve been especially promoted in the more recent work of theologian Daniel Strange.

Bavinck identifies five internal pulls – what he calls “magnetic points” – that just about every human being experiences, and through which God is persistently pointing every person to himself – revealing himself to them. They are the inescapable human longings that he places in our hearts for: deliverance, ethics, connection, destiny, and transcendence.

First, every human being senses their need for deliverance. They know, deep down, that something is wrong with the world, and that they need to be delivered from it – they need help from outside of themselves to rescue them.

This impulse, this instinct, this gnawing sense that something is wrong, and we need to be delivered from it – this is not, ultimately, the result of people’s reasoning, or cleverness, or careful study. It’s a gut-level internal awareness. It’s a truth God persistently speaks into the heart of every human being, and they cannot escape it.

God tells them that they need him to deliver them ... because sin and death have entered this world, and he is the only One who can save them from it.

People may suppress that knowledge. They may redirect their sense of the problem to other things, and redirect their search for a deliverer away from God and look instead for deliverance from a self-help guru, or a political savior, or an educational program, or an economic philosophy, or something else ... but deep down all people know they need a Deliverer. Because God has told them. And he won’t let them escape that fact.

But “deliverance” isn’t the only inescapable longing God places in every human heart.

He also speaks to each human heart of their need for ethical norms. And we see this all around us today.

For a society that is supposed to be against moral restraints, our culture is actually obsessed with enforcing ethical norms and morals. Both traditional media and social media are filled with moral condemnations of others, and proclamations of our own virtues.

Everyone knows that there is a right way to live and a wrong way to live. And everyone longs to be in the right. They may disagree wildly on what is right and what is wrong and what makes a person good – but they all seem to agree that there is a way to be a good person, and we should all seek to be that. Why is that?

The Bible tells us that it’s because God has written his law on our hearts. [Romans 2:15] God is actively at work, speaking his moral truth to each person. People don’t know there is a right and a wrong because they’ve all studied moral philosophy. They know it deep in their guts, in a way that they cannot escape. Because God has spoken it to them – he has written it on their hearts.

Again, people twist and suppress that. They may even call evil good and good evil. But they cannot seem to escape those categories of good and evil – whatever they choose to call them. Because God won’t let them. It’s part of how he is persistently speaking to them about himself – how he is at work in every human heart.

The inescapable reality of morals and ethics and the deep longing for moral vindication that every person feels is a second way God persistently speaks into and reveals himself, in every human heart.

The third magnetic point that Johan Bavinck identifies is connection.

We long for connection to something bigger than ourselves, in ways we cannot escape. We walk on a trail in the woods, and we feel a longing to be connected and in harmony with nature and the world around us. We gather with a group of people, and we long to be deeply connected with them. We long to be connected to the creation and the people around us ... but often we feel instead our alienation from the world, and from one another.

We may try to be content living for ourselves – living as an island ... but it never works. We cannot escape the longing. Because God has placed it in our hearts – he reminds us again and again that it is not good for us to be alone [Genesis 2:18] – we were made for connection with the world he has made, and the people he has made. And we all know this.

We may suppress and twist that knowledge into pagan conceptions of nature, or sinful ways of seeking intimacy, but we cannot shake the truth that we were made for connection with the other creations of God – that we share a common Maker with them – because God persistently speaks that truth into every human heart.

A fourth magnetic point or deep longing that we cannot escape, is the sense that our life and all of history, must have a coherent story to it. We cannot shake the conviction that our lives and the life of this world must be going somewhere – there must be some coherent arc to the story we find ourselves in.

Again, it is God who tells us this. And he impresses on our hearts the truth that he is the ultimate Author of these stories, bringing them to a climax and a final resolution, and that we have a real part to play and real choices to make in that story.

We may suppress that truth, set some aspects against others – flailing towards fatalism or self-determinism – but we cannot shake the idea that our lives and this world are part of a story, that it is going somewhere, and that Someone is authoring it all ... because God keeps speaking that truth into every human heart.

Fifth and finally, human beings cannot shake a longing for transcendence. The ubiquitous persistence of religion throughout human history testifies to this truth. Humans may suppress their longing for the transcendent for a season, but it always crops up again ... because God is always speaking into every human heart the reality of eternity and that there is more to this world than meets the eye. [Ecclesiastes 3:11]

Every human being who has ever existed, has had to deal with God persistently speaking these five truths and more, into their hearts, from the moment of their conception to the moment of their death. They may spend enormous amounts of energy suppressing God's self-revelation. But they cannot escape it.

And God, if he chooses to, is able to overcome even their best efforts to suppress his voice. We see that in our text.

Left to themselves, the sinful hearts of the Magi would have resisted the call of the star – many others did, after all. But God would not let them. He overcame their sinful hearts. And suddenly they found themselves on the road to Jerusalem, seeking a Jewish Messiah.

Over the millennia, God has overcome the resistance of countless men and women, boys and girls, to draw them to himself. And he is capable of doing the same thing in the lives of the non-Christians in your life.

And if that is true (and it is) ... then how could we lose hope? How could we give up? How could we grow cynical? How could we retreat from our calling?

God is at work. He is actively revealing himself in the hearts and lives on non-Christians. And that is a truth we see in Matthew 2 – it is a truth of Epiphany – that should give us hope.

That's the first thing we see here.

But God doesn't stop there. Because though he starts by revealing himself when they are far off, when he brings that work to completion, God also reveals himself through his Church, in spite of his Church, and unto salvation.

And on these points we'll be much more brief.

II. The Lord Is Actively Revealing Himself through His Church

But once we see how God has revealed himself to non-Christians directly, the next thing we see is that he ordinarily continues that work, in essential ways, through his Church.

And we see that right here in this passage.

It's clear from verse nine through eleven that God could have just used the star to lead the Magi to Jesus directly. He later uses the star to lead them to the exact house. He could have bypassed Jerusalem and let them straight there. But he didn't. Instead, he used the star to lead them first to Jerusalem, to the covenant people of God – in other words, to the Church.

God actively draws the Magi to his Church ... so that they can ask the Church for directions on where to go next. That's essentially what's happening in verse two. God led the Magi to the covenant community – to the people of God – so that they could ask them for further directions about how to find and worship Christ.

And ordinarily, God continues to work in the same way today.

God is actively at work revealing himself to all people. But ordinarily, he does not draw them to himself in isolation. Ordinarily, he does not lead them directly to himself. Ordinarily, he first draws them to his people. He chooses to use his people as a key means by which he draws people to himself. And so the Magi come to the people of God before they come to Jesus. And we see that same pattern elsewhere in the Bible [Acts 8:26-39; 9:17-18; 22:12-16], because ordinarily, faith comes by hearing the gospel from the people of God [Romans 10:14-17].

And what the Church is called on to do in each of those situations is, in some ways, very simple: We are simply called on to communicate God's Word to them.

That's what we see in our text. In verses five and six the chief priests and scribes communicate Micah 5:2 and its meaning to the Magi.

Though God could bring the Magi to himself directly, and though he was already at work in their lives, he wanted to bring them to himself through his Word – through the Scriptures. And he

wanted to communicate the Scriptures to them through his people. And so that is what happens here. [Augustine, Sermon 199.2 (p.255)]

And it's what God continues to do today. And it's a reminder that as God's people, we are called on to teach and to apply the Scriptures to others.

And that can take many different forms.

Often it begins by us preaching with our deeds, as we live our lives in accord with the gospel, loving others and serving Christ, in ways that will naturally lead to others taking notice.

It starts there, but it doesn't usually end there. Usually we are called on next to use our words.

Sometimes that's as simple as giving honest answers to questions people ask about our lives or our beliefs.

Sometimes it's giving advice to others that's rooted in Scriptural truth, when they ask us for advice.

Sometimes it's explaining to someone what we believe because the timing seems right to us, even if they haven't asked us – and so we tell them about who Jesus is, what he has done for us, and why we have committed our lives to him.

Sometimes it's as simple as just inviting a friend to join us in coming to church, if that seems to us like the best next step for them.

Whatever the details, we need to remember that the Lord has placed us in the lives of others for a reason – we are to be his witnesses. And in that role, we are to use the wisdom he has given us to discern how and when to communicate his truth to others. We should be wise and discerning and winsome. But we also must avoid being cowardly. Speaking God's truth to others often feels scary. But it's what we are called to do.

But it should feel less scary when we remember that we are not the first or the primary speakers of truth in that person's life, any more than the scribes were for the Magi. Far before we showed up, the Lord has been at work in their lives too – he has been speaking his truth to them, revealing himself through those inescapable longings he has placed in their hearts, and in many other ways. We are simply joining in, for a moment, on the work that God is already doing. He is in control of it. And anything is possible with him. And so we should take courage, we should be encouraged, and we should speak God's truth to others with hope that is rooted in the work and power of God.

So God ordinarily continues his work of self-revelation through us – through his Church.

III. The Lord Is Actively Revealing Himself in Spite of His Church

But at the same time, he also continues his work of self-revelation often in spite of his Church.

And this is an important point for us to remember.

The Church here – the covenant people of God in this passage ... are not great examples of faith. In fact, the portion of the Church that the Magi encounter in Jerusalem are pretty terrible examples of what God's people are supposed to be like.

They are complacent at best ... and treacherously hypocritical at worst.

First: the chief priests and scribes here are complacent in their faith at best.

Think about this for a minute: By verse five, the scribes and chief priests had all the same information as the Magi – more actually! The Magi come and tell them, and all in Jerusalem, how the star appeared, and they presumably explain how they know that this star is meant to indicate the birth of the Messiah.

And then the scribes and the chief priests respond by adding to that information – by laying out what they know from the Hebrew Scriptures about the birth of the Messiah.

And then the Magi pack up and get ready to go and meet the Messiah of Israel, the God-given King of the Jews ... and the chief priests and scribes all decide to stay behind in Jerusalem. None of them go to see him. That's shocking. [Augustine, Sermon 199.2 (p.255)]

But besides being shocking, it's a terrible witness to the Magi. Is this what God's people are like? This complacent? This indifferent? God gives them a Messiah and they can't even be bothered to go and see him? The Jews themselves don't even seem to believe their own Scriptures – and so why should the Magi?

The thought must have crossed the minds of the Magi ... right? It probably came up in their conversation as they left "If they can't be bothered to go and see this one who was born ... then why are we making such a big deal out of it?"

And yet, if the complacency of the Jews in Jerusalem did challenge the Magi's budding faith, the Lord overcame that challenge. They continued on.

And yet, an even bigger obstacle from the covenant people of God was still to come, in the form of Herod.

After visiting Jesus, the Magi were informed, in a dream, that the leader among the people of God whom they had spoken to – that Herod – intended to kill, rather than worship the new Messiah. In the earliest stages of their own faith, the Magi were confronted with treacherous hypocrisy among God's people.

And yet ... they respond not with disillusioned abandonment of their new faith, but with faithful obedience to the message of the dream. At possible risk to their own safety, they disobey Herod, and depart by another way.

In the end, God succeeds in revealing himself to the Magi in spite of their seeing unfaithfulness among God's people.

And once again, that continues to be an important truth we need to remember today.

Now ... don't hear what I'm not saying. It's true that unfaithfulness and the hypocrisy in the Church can be a hurdle or a barrier for the spread of the gospel. And the Bible repeatedly reminds us that if we become such hurdles and barriers to the faith of others, whether through complacency, hypocrisy, or treachery, then we will face the Lord's displeasure. I'm not minimizing that in any way.

Those hurdles and barriers are real – and they are serious. But what I'm pointing out from our text is that those hurdles and barriers are never stronger than God. He is able to overcome them – just as he did with the Magi.

And that should encourage us. When we see unfaithfulness and hypocrisy in the Church, we should be distressed. We should work diligently for the peace and the purity of the Church. But at the very same time, we need not fret or worry that the purposes of God in the advance of his gospel will be thwarted by the unfaithfulness of those who bear his name.

As important as the Church is in what God is doing, it is not the Church, with all its flaws, that saves sinners. It is God. And God is perfect. And his perfection can always overcome the flaws of his people.

And so once again, we should be encouraged. We should have hope when it comes to evangelism, because we are reminded of the power of God in his Epiphany.

IV. The Lord Is Actively Revealing Himself towards Salvation

Finally, our text reminds us that the Lord is able to finish what he starts. He's able to bring those he seeks to true salvation.

In verse 11 the Magi reach Jesus. They fall down and worship him. Then they offer him their tribute – honoring him as their king. And then, in verse 12, they obey God's commands to them, even though it puts them at risk.

The Magi worship, and honor, and obey the Lord. Their journey reaches its true destination in their faith and salvation.

And in the same way, God is able to finish the work he starts of bringing sinners to himself.

The story for each person looks different. As Jesus's parable of the sower reminds us, not all who show an interest at first will ultimately bear fruit and be saved.

We don't know the end of each person's story, or how the Lord will get them to that end. But we do know that the Lord is sovereign over each person's story, and he is able to finish what he started.

That is the foundation of our hope. That should spur on our prayer. So that as we point others to Jesus, we entrust them to God's power and not our own.

He is a God who came into the world to save sinners. Even the foremost of sinners. [1 Tim 1:15] Even hostile sinners. Even apathetic sinners. Even far-off sinners. Even unexpected sinners.

Even sinners like you and me.

With him, nothing is impossible.

And for that reason, we can have hope.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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This sermon draws in some points from my 2020 Epiphany sermon “Epiphany and the Pattern of True Faith”:
<https://www.faithacoma.org/advent-nicoletti/epiphany-and-the-pattern-of-true-faith-matthew-21-12>

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.