P.A.X.: Posture of Prayer Memory Verse: Matthew 2:11a

December 18th, 2022 Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

**SLIDE 1: Title**

 Today we find ourselves beginning the fourth and final week of Advent. Our time of preparation is nearly over. Christmas is right around the corner! And as we look forward to travel plans and reuniting with family and meals and gifts, as Christians we pump the brakes a little. We slow down. We know it is coming, but we sit in this time of waiting. We embrace a sense of expectation. That is what we have been talking about all through this series: awakening expectation…and we do so through prayer. Anytime is a good time to pray. Any season is a good time to preach about prayer, but there is something about prayer and waiting that go hand in hand.

 As Pastor Cassi pointed out to us last week, the people of God were praying for generations that deliverance would come for Israel. From our human stand point, the waiting seemed to be a long time. But we trust that God unfolded his plan at the right time. Even now, we believe that Jesus is coming back to establish his rule and reign in a final restoration of this world into his eternal kingdom. From our human standpoint, Jesus is overdue. But we trust in God’s timing.

**SLIDE 2: waiting is good for us**

 Somehow, God has decided that waiting is good for us. Deep down we actually know this. As much as we hate waiting, it is something we hopefully try to instill into our children. If you have ever had kids or been around them it does not take long to spot the difference between a child who gets what they want when they want it, we might term that “spoiled”, and a child who is more accustomed to waiting. Kids are good at getting what they want. The default strategy of my kids is to whine. Cry about it long and loud enough, wear mom and dad down enough, and eventually you will get your way. My wife has taken to name calling. When a kid starts to dig in their heels or starts to incessantly ask “Why not?” she will begin to refer to them as badgers. This badgering comes in various forms, but it all derives from the driving desire to get what they want now! Roald Dahl’s classic character Varuca Salt was this way, “Don’t care how, I want it now!” and everyone agrees that she was a “bad egg”.

**SLIDE 3: Varuca Salt**

 Our heavenly Father is not interested in having a bunch of bad eggs for children. He does not want to spoil us. And so, more often than not, we are asked to wait. The writer of Hebrews acknowledges in chapter 6 verse 8 that we inherit the promises of God through faith and patience. James compares us to farmers who wait patiently for the rain to come. They look forward to the precious fruit that will be produced. They live in expectation. James then lets us know that we too must wait patiently, and we must strengthen our resolve as we wait for the return of the Lord Jesus. Paul encourages us through his word to the Roman church. He calls us to even have patience in troubling times! These hard times initiate a chain reaction for whose of us who follow after Jesus. He writes in chapter 5 verse 3: “Trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And of course, we cannot hope in what we can see, just as we cannot wait for something we already have.

 So as we wait, we pray. But what is the posture of that waiting? What is our mode? Our form? Waiting, like the complaining of children comes in many forms. There is the line at the grocery store, the line at the pharmacy, backup in traffic. There is the waiting for a package to be delivered, a repair man to show up or a human being to pick up the other end of a phone call. Sometimes we have to wait in recovery, wait for test results, wait before we go swimming. Some of us are waiting, waiting, waiting on the world to change. And wouldn’t you know it, we have dedicated whole rooms to waiting. Usually, and I’ll speak for myself, usually our waiting is characterized by impatience. Maybe a little deep sighing, a little watch checking, some anxiousness, maybe conversation with the manager or the complaint line. For as much waiting as we do, we are not very good at it. We live under the illusion that we should not have to wait. We want convenience. We want instant results. We are Varuca. We are told we deserve it, whatever it is that we want. We are told that, but not by God. God says “wait”.

 One of the ways we can make the most of our waiting is to be in prayer. For those of us who have grown up in the church, we were taught some very specific physical postures needed before one could pray. Can anyone take a stab at what I am talking about?

**SLIDE 4: fold your hands, bow your head, close your eyes**

 Three things that precede any prayer: fold your hands, bow your head, and the ever important, close your eyes. Once that checklist has been met, prayer can proceed. But there is a few problems with this train of thought. First and foremost, this model is not biblical. None of that checklist is found in God’s word, and secondly…it’s really not very practical. Does prayer cease when we blink our eyes open or unclasp our hands? And how can we take Paul seriously when he encourages us to pray without ceasing? No, we understand this checklist to be a helpful guide. We use it as a means to indicate to our hearts and minds that we are about to engage in something important.

 Is there something to this idea of posture when it comes to prayer? Turn with me to Matthew 2. I want to take a look at what is probably a very well known story, but I want to look at it from the perspective of prayer and the physical posture of those doing the praying. In Matthew 2 we read, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem.” We traditionally refer to them as “We Three Kings” and even though they did not actually rule over any territory, they would have been considered kings as they likely served as advisors to kings. The term magi refers to magic, but we usually understand these men to be involved in astronomy, or the study of the stars. Though they were Gentiles from Babylon, they were likely well versed in Jewish traditions and scripture. And though we don’t know exactly what it is that they spotted in the sky, what is referred to as a star seems to appear extraordinarily. Being astronomers, these men notice the anomaly and begin to research what it could be. They are intrigued by some prophecies concerning a certain “King of the Jews” and they embark on what amounts to be a 900 mile journey towards the west. But even wise men admit that fact that they do not know all things as Matthew continues in verse 2: “ They asked, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east and we’ve come to honor him.’ When King Herod heard this he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him.” Now we must pause and ask why? What is so troubling about a bunch of foreigners trying to find an address for a newborn child? Maybe nothing except for the fact that thay are not looking for any child, they are seeking the “king of the Jews.” This is troubling because Herod is the king of the Jews and everyone knows it! At least he was the one appointed there by the Roman Emperor to keep the peace and make sure the Jews didn’t act up. But Herod is no fool. He remains calm and hatches a plan. READ 4-12.

**SLIDE 5 -6: Matthew 2:4-12**

 These magi, wise men, astronomers, and scholars, they did not know who Jesus was with any full understanding. They were not necessarily privy to the fact that God’s grand plan of salvation was not put into motion. In fact, I wonder if they had unending questions swirling theough their minds as they pulled up their camels to what Matthew refers to as a “house”. Could this be the right place? 900 miles for this? There is nothing kingly about this? Yet one glace upward confirmed their destination. There was the star straight overhead. The doubts and questions faded and Matthew writes, when they saw that star, the beacon that had brought them all this way, they were filled with joy. Indeed, this normal, nondescript house was the right place. They enter the home, see Jesus with their eyes and yell surprise! They exclaim ‘Finally! Wow, what a trip!” They ask Mary if she has anything to drink. No! No, what do they do? They fall to their knees in honor of him. Their physical posture mirrors the state of their hearts. Again, when it comes to kids, even as young as two, when they do something wrong and they get caught, they avert their eyes. They refuse to look at you. In order to address the behavior and have a teaching moment, I find myself saying over and over again, “Look at me. Look at Daddy.” This is true even with our teenagers. It is much easier to look at the floor while mom and dad are trying to address something with you. The demeanor, the posture of the child mirrors the state of the heart. Forcing that look establishes communication. It opens our relationship. The eyes are important. We say they are the windows to the soul. It is all a part of our physical posture mirroring the state of our hearts.

**SLIDE 7: Wise Men bowing**

 And to bow, is quite the posture. I’m curious to know, has anyone here ever bowed? Maybe you’ve met the queen, or were involved in some sort of dance, maybe you have visited eastern cultures where bowing is the norm. The term here that Matthew uses is *pesoutev* which means “to fall” and *prosekunsan* which is a word we connect with worship. But it literally means to kiss the hand. An act of reverence. And act of submission. Have you ever kissed the hand of someone? Eden, our six year old has quite a personality. She does and says things that make her mom and shoot looks at each other. We will ask each other, “Where did she get that?” or, “What did you let her watch?” There is no telling where my daughter gets her ideas from, but one of the things she has always done, since she stared school in kindergarten is to come to both her mom and me, take us by the hand and give us a little smooch in the back of our hands. She then tramps out to the bus to start her day.

 Now I am not saying Eden worships us in anyway, but she is showing honoring in her unique and touching way. But that is what is going on here with the wise men. They are falling before one who is greater. They are offering up a heart the intends to kiss the hand of this child/king. Just as my daughter extends this motion to us as her parents, here these adult men extend this motion to a small child.

 And here in this little house somewhere in Bethlehem ancient words come to light. Words like Psalm 72:11 “Let all the kings bow down before him; let all the nations serve him.”

**SLIDE 8: Psalm 72:11 “Let all the kings bow down before him; let all the nations serve him.”**

 Bowing and hand kissing are pretty strange in our culture, but not in the heavenly realms. In heaven we see the angels and elders bowing before the throne of God. In the Christ hymn found in Philippians 2, Paul writes: “…God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth and under the earth might bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Let me reiterat now, that is everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth… that includes all kings and those in supposed power, that includes all Americans even if they are unaccustomed. I would say that even includes all those who have died and currently find themselves under the earth.

 The physical posture of bowing may be an important way that we mirror the state of our hearts. Just as a little kid does not want to look at their parents, a good parent will insist on eye-contact. I think it’s clear that God insists on the proper respect as well. If we don’t bow now, we will bow later! Now, is it possible to come before God in humble submission with out physical bowing? Can’t our heart bow while our body saves us the hassle? I think it is possible, but I wonder what might happen if you and I took up the practice of bowing. Worship leader Zach Neese puts it this way, “If we want His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, we have to do the things they are doing in heaven. In heaven they are bowing!” He issues a challenge in his book *How to Worship a King* saying “Roll out of bed, get on your face before the Lord and ask, ‘What do you want with me Jesus?’…I guarantee it will change your life – it will change the lives of everyone you come in contact with. Why? Because Jesus can work through a humble, submitted heart.”

**SLIDE 9: Jesus can work through a humble, submitted heart**

 I realize some of us have physical limitations, some of us have bad knees and whatnot, I realize that bowing is not always possible, but even still, how can we demonstrate physically that we possess a humble, submitted heart? How can we conform our bodies to the reality within us? How can we honor this King Jesus? Bowing our heads of course is a good start, but I wonder if you might be willing to take the extra step and enter into prayer with me on our knees. If we as individuals can bow before the Lord, than this church can truly be a humble, submitted church and Jesus, our King Jesus can work with that. Can we try it together?