



Worship Series: “Expecting Grace”

“The Gift Manifested”—Sermon Texts:

Matthew 2:1-12

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

Wesley Covenant: 1 January 2017

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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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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).

Many medical centers, shopping malls, and free standing buildings have an area within named “Wellness Center” or “Fitness Center” posted over the door. A fitness or wellness center is no doubt a place where more discipline occurs than at most other places. Many establishments have fitness as their primary purpose. These places have telling names: “Curves,” “Body Works,” “Total Workout,” “Anytime Fitness,” “24 Hour Fitness,” “L A Fitness” and “Busy Bodies.”

While most of the names sound like names for auto repair businesses, physical fitness regimens are as close as many people get to authentic discipline. Listen to 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 attempts to place the human endurance of suffering into perspective. In fact, the writer employs the image of endurance to make the concept discipline clearer. Further the writer uses an analogy of a parent's discipline of a child to emphasize God's discipline for believers. If we accept the discipline of our human parents, then how much more should we be subject to the discipline of God?

Of course discipline and the New Year seem closely linked in our minds. On this first Sabbath of a New Year we conventionally renew our confession of faith. There are, of course, many ways to do this renewing. Some do it with resolutions, some just make a mental note to try to do better, and some use a worship form that we have abridged and called "The Wesleyan Covenant Service."

This statement about discipline from Hebrews is a classic Greek rhetorical argument of "the lesser to the greater," similar to Jesus' argument in Luke. Jesus argued rhetorically, "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)?

Not only this, but as parental discipline exists for a short time, God intends divine discipline endures so that we may share in God's holiness. Discipline always seems painful at the time, but later it yields righteousness as a fruit of discipline. The text's argument boils down to the assertion that discipline eventually leads to healing. Most 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.

No doubt, 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 12:7-14). Thus, in the long run, the pain of discipline promotes good health in both the physical and the spiritual realms. Discipline is the ability an individual calls on to do what Stephen Covey suggests by the phrase “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.

But the self-discipline of self-mastery we urge on ourselves includes actions that we are not naturally inclined to do. We call this inertia in physics. A partial definition of inertia is that 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 juice left over to argue with my parents about my bedtime. Yet, when my mother took me shopping for school clothes once a year I was totally worn out and dead legged after only an hour.

Recently, I went on a family shopping trip. After walking for only thirty minutes through various stores, I was worn out. So I sat down on an opportune bench I encountered. It felt so good just to sit. I believe I could have remained there all day. Getting off that bench took major motivation—or discipline. Much of our lives are like this circumstance. We grow so comfortable even in the pursuit of nothing that it is easier merely to sit than to get up and do something.

In terms of self-mastery, discipline is required to change our inertia—to get us moving in a positive direction. Generally, self-discipline is not a once in a lifetime heroic 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). The only way to get off the bench and

do something is to let discipline exert itself on us. Spiritual discipline is what Christians do to put themselves in God's arena. Perhaps this is why John Wesley so often addressed the spiritual disciplines.

In the Wesleyan bands and classes, that is small groups intended to foster the spiritual disciplines, the question believers asked each other was this: "How is it with your soul?" Mr. Wesley saw community as vital to the practice of spiritual disciplines. Among these spiritual disciplines: Bible study, prayer, worship, fasting, meditation, and works of service. Richard Foster described spiritual discipline: "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 and 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 later, "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 there is a pillar with the name "discipline" inscribed on it. Amen.