

King of Kings
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

- ¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
- ² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
- ³ May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
- ⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
- ⁵ May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
- ⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
- ⁷ In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
- ¹⁰ May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
- ¹¹ May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.
- ¹² For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
- ¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
- ¹⁴ From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

Matthew 2:1-12

- ¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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. ⁸Then 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.’ ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We’ve read that the wise men knelt down and paid the young Jesus homage. This act is notable for a number of reasons: because they recognized and acknowledged his divinity, because they were the first Gentiles, or non-Jews, to worship Jesus, because they were doing so before a child, because this child was from a small town, well outside the centers of power, and born to parents who were also well outside of power. They worshipped the wholly unexpected.

This reading prompts us to ask to what do we bow down? Or maybe the question is “by what are we bowed down?” Past the holiday rush, do you now feel bowed down by debt incurred for the sake of the holiday – bowing down to consumption and bowed down by it? In your life, perhaps you have bowed down to the opinions of others; maybe you’ve bowed down for the expectations of others – society, bosses, family members. Maybe you’ve bowed down to yourself.

In the movie *Evan Almighty*, the main character, Evan, becomes a state senator under the campaign platform of “Change the World.” The first night in their new D.C. area home, Evan’s wife suggests he might want to consider asking God for help to tackle the enormous job of changing the world, saying, if she were him, she would want all the help she could get. While she sleeps, we see Evan get out of bed and kneel down beside it to pray to God. After thanking God for the new material things in his life, he adds a request that God help him change the world.

The very next day God gets to work alongside Evan but not in the way Evan expected and so, over and over again, in absurd and humorous ways, Evan fights God’s help all the way. Evan wanted to change the world the way he envisioned, not the way that God envisions. Evan was bowing down to his own self-perceived great ideas, completely ignoring God’s ideas; he was bowing down to himself.

I suspect as you sit here you can imagine to whom it is right to bow down, who is rightly worshipped – the one for whom the wise men traveled from afar, the child who has been born king of the Jews. Today’s readings remind us why. The psalm is a poetic job description of sorts for the king for whom the Jews hoped. He would deliver the needy, the poor, and those who have no helper when they called. He would have pity on the weak and the needy and save the lives of the needy. He would save

them from oppression and violence because their blood is precious is his sight, the very essence of their lives is valuable.

His care for the least of the people would cause others to revere him. The psalm signifies the kings of Tarshish and of the isles and of Sheba and Seba would revere him. You may better recognize these as Spain and Cyprus and Sicily and east Africa and Arabia.¹ This was the extent of the known world in that day so the meaning was that every king would come and bow down before this king of the Jews. They would revere him not for his military prowess or the wealth or size of his kingdom but because of how those in need were cared for.

As he reigns, he judges with righteousness, and judges the poor with justice. He causes the mountains to yield prosperity and the hills righteousness. He defends the cause of the poor, gives deliverance to the needy, crushes those who oppress. As Paul wrote of Jesus to the Philippians, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...”² We cannot help but understand why Jesus is worthy of our worship, worthy of being the only one to whom we bow down.

Yet we recognize that there is a clear reason why the first commandment is “you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.”³ The commandments, all of them, guide us away from our inclinations to turn away from God; the urge to bow down before others, and ourselves, is great.

So how do we bring our worship back to Christ; how do we bow down first and foremost to God? I recently read a book which I recommend highly, and without caveat, called *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time*, written by a Presbyterian pastor named MaryAnn McKibben Dana. With three kids, she and her husband, along with their kids, had begun to feel like their lives were non-stop and, as a result, less meaningful than they suspected their lives could be. They set out to create Sabbath time in their schedules to see if they could change the emptiness which an overly full life seems to bring. As they neared the end of the year-long experiment, she wrote, “when other things try to take the place of God in your life, you shall remember that there is only one God and put

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 203.

² Philippians 2:8-10.

³ Exodus 20:3-4.

everything else in its proper place. Sabbath helps us do this because we put away being useful and affirm that we are not in charge of our own lives.”⁴

Now, it doesn't take having three kids to feel like our non-stop lives could have more meaning, more God and less of the idols, including the idols of our own self-perceived important plans. Rather than recap her entire book, I will tell you that she acknowledges how hard it can be to make room for Sabbath, she suggests ways to be faithful to the Sabbath when the Sabbath just doesn't seem to fit, and she gives hope that Sabbath in some form can be attainable for all. When we stop bowing down to everything else, it becomes easier to see the God to whom we desire to bow down.

How else can we bring our worship back to Christ, bowing down first and foremost to God? Perhaps instead of bowing down to Citibank or Bank of America or Discover? When we spend our hours paying off debt, worrying about debt, and creating new debt, debt and the reduction of it become that to which we bow down, leaving us less energy, time, and passion to bow down before God. If debt is your idol that has inserted itself before God, then I recommend, with small caveat, the work of Dave Ramsey. The caveat? Early on in his work, his debt reduction blueprint for people simply focused on building wealth. Now he is clear that the intent of building wealth is to make it possible for you to be generous, so that others might have who did not. His personality is not for all but his aim is to make it possible for people to do more for the kingdom of God. His *Financial Peace University* program for churches is accompanied by the slogan: “What could the people of God do for the kingdom of God if they were debt-free?”⁵ I cannot argue with that.

And what if your own great ideas have pulled you away from worshipping Christ, and bowing down first and foremost to God? Our family had the great pleasure of spending an evening earlier this week with two daughters of our closest friends. As we drove to our destination, the conversation was flowing and, as I listened, I saw through the eyes of the eight-year-old a passion for ending injustice. In her case, it was trying to stop a bully from being mean to the kindergartners at school. And in her eyes what he was doing was simply wrong. My adult mind went to wondering what might be going on at home for him, wondering what might be fueling this desire for attention even in bad ways. I contend that those details matter, but they don't change the fact that what he was doing was wrong. Recognizing that made me wonder how many unjust circumstances I look at through excuses and explanations which, while possibly valid, cause me to grant permission to injustice. Perhaps the gift of child-like vision is what led Jesus to speak of the value of children. What would a child learning about God say of my grand

⁴ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), p. 129.

⁵ <https://www.daveramsey.com/church/>

plans? Would she question me? Would he challenge me? What excuse or explanation might I try to offer?

It is work to put everything in its proper place behind God. No solely human king could ever meet the qualities of the king listed in the psalm, no human alone of any sort, only Jesus, the king of kings. But we who confess our sins together and seek forgiveness together know that we must try to assist in defending the cause of the poor, delivering the needy, and fighting the oppressors instead of standing in the way. We begin by bowing down.

Let us pray: Help us, O God, to recognize and acknowledge that the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of Christ; help us worship him above all else, in all we do, we pray. Amen.