

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

Theme: The tenacious search for the satisfaction of our souls is complete when we find Christ, and then the journey begins anew.

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction:

The wise men were on a search. What were they doing so far from home? What were they after? Why would anyone inconvenience themselves by traveling 700 miles in a camel caravan over desolate land? What was so unsatisfying and unfulfilling about what they believed? Wasn't it enough to be star gazers who read the fate of their life in fixed constellations? These we have come to know as the Magi were probably a priestly class of Medes from the land of ancient Persia, which we now know as Iran. These were students of the heavens who found meaning in the pattern of the stars. Astrologers we call them. If astronomy is the study of the laws of movement of the stars, then astrology is the study of message or meaning of the stars for earthly life. Life, it was believed by astrologers, was determined by your date of birth. What is your sign we say today? Those who swear by astrology believe that good or evil can be predicted by what was already written into the pattern of the universe. For the Magi, the planets contained power and mighty spirits which impinged upon happenings on earth. In others words, they looked to the creation rather than the creator as the end of all things.

But what are they doing seeking out the birth of a special child in Israel? Could it be that their impersonal, mechanistic view of the world where one's life was pre-preprogrammed by the natural order was not satisfying? Had a stirring taken place in their spirits that said there must be something more? Perhaps they were experiencing what the apostle Paul writes that all humanity intuitively knows when we observe the phenomenal order of the universe. **"Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:19-20).** The creation pointed to the Creator. The wise men longed for the personal in an impersonal world; they knew that there had to be something more.

To Matthew the wise men represented all people from all lands, in whom the Holy Spirit stirs up a divine unrest. They seek the One before whom they would bow. It is only when they find the right object of worship that their search would be complete. This morning I want to look at this story almost exclusively through the journey *the Magi* take to seek satisfaction for their souls. As we observe the passion and longing in which *the wise men* pursued truth that

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

completes, it is a good time for us to take stock and ask, do we have the desire to continuously seek the only satisfaction for our souls?

What makes for the search that satisfies? Three things.

1. First, the Magi believed that there was truth to be found. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him’ (Matthew 2:1-2).

What were these visitors from the East doing paying the homage of worship before a king of the Jews? Matthew opens wide the doors of God’s heart from the outset. At the end of his gospel, Jesus is going to tell his disciples to...“go and make disciples of all people (nations).” Matthew foreshadows this universal message by bringing the nations to the Christ at the very beginning. And hated people at that! Magi is the root for magician. The Magi practiced the magical arts, which were despised in Israel and to be purged from the land. Those who were magicians, soothsayers, wizards, and mediums were anathema among the people of God. We meet other Magi, such as Simon Magus in Acts 8 and Elymas, the magician, in Acts 13, both of which were treated harshly as enemies of the gospel. That Matthew includes these men sympathetically and prominently as early visitors of the Christ child, says there is one truth that transcends all cultures, beliefs, religions, and ethnic origins. There is one reality around which all are to gather.

The wise men pursued truth where it was to be found. They went beyond their ethnic loyalties, they transcended the limitations of their mechanistic belief system, and they shunned the accusations of betrayal to their heritage, because they knew there was truth to be found.

How contrary to the spirit of our times! We don’t believe that there is truth out there beyond us that we must go in search of. Our primary loyalties are to tribe and ethnic group. In so many parts of the world nationality becomes god. Try to leave the Muslim faith, you are not only symbolically declared dead, it would be the height of honor to have a family member take your life. In terms of religion people might say, “I was born a Catholic, I will die a Catholic.” I have had conversations with Jewish leaders who have told me that the Jewish people were off limits to proselytizing in the name of Christ. Our tribal allegiances become our primary loyalties. This was true in Jesus’ day. Is this not why Jesus said the radical words, “Anyone who loves his father and mother more than me is not worthy of me.” Family or tribe or ethnic group can be turned into a god.

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

In addition, in our relativistic culture truth is viewed primarily as personal truth. There is no objective, absolute, universal, transcendent truth that is true for all in which we are to go in search of, because all truth is simply what works for me. You have your truth, and I have my truth, end of story. The Swedish actress Liv Ullman gave the best summary I have read of this relativistic world view when she said in a TV interview, "There are no rules that can apply to everybody and there are many kinds of truth. The one which is easiest and best to live by is your own, the core within yourself. I never told my daughter that what I say is the truth."

Yet the fundamental claim of Christianity and of Christ himself is there is a truth for all that cuts across all cultures, religions, ethnic and tribal groups, economic stations, etc. It is to be found in the Christ child. This child king was whom the wise men had come to worship. Jesus said of himself, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Can it be said with any greater clarity? There is a fixed point to which we all must come, there is only one reality around which we must gather. Jesus is that fixed point.

Let me illustrate with a story. Two battleships had been at sea in heavy weather on training maneuvers. Since the visibility was poor because of the patchy fog, the captain remained on the bridge. Just before dark, the lookout reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow." The captain yelled, "Is it steady or moving." "Steady, captain." The captain told the signalman, "Signal that ship: We are on collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees." Back came the signal, "Advisable you change course 20 degrees." The captain, now a little hot, "Send, I'm a captain, change course 20 degrees." Back came the reply, "I'm a seaman second class, you had better change course 20 degrees." Now the captain was really steamed. He spat out, "Send, I'm a battleship. Change course 20 degrees." Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

The captain in the relativistic pea soup of the night is floating blind to his own peril. What a picture of our world. People are navigating through life not knowing that there is a lighthouse, the light of the world, who is the fixed reality.

This child in the manger is God's unrivaled truth, the revelation of God Himself. It is this claim to absolute truth that has rankled so many. The French philosopher Auguste Comte was one such individual. It was the issue of truth that was central to the celebrated meeting between Comte and Thomas Carlyle. Comte said he wanted to sweep away Christianity and everything in its wake and start a new religion. To which Carlyle replied, "Splendid! All you need to do is to speak as never man spoken, to live as never man lived, to be crucified, rise again on the third day, and get the world to believe you are still alive. Then your religion will have some chance of success."

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

The presence of wise men as visitors at the birth of Jesus said that they knew there was truth to be found and their welcome inclusion in this story tells us that Christ is the truth for all peoples.

What makes the search satisfying? First, knowing that there is a destination. It is not just the journey, but the arrival that counts.

2. Truth is worth seeking with all our hearts. Tenacity marked the wise men's search.

Not only did the wise men come a long way, it took a long time. Some have estimated the length of travel up to two years to get to the Christ child. By the time they arrive Jesus is no longer an infant in a stable, but a young child in a house. **"And going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary..." (Matthew 2:11).** We know from what follows that King Herod, threatened by the rumors of a rival king, had all the male children in the region of Bethlehem under two years of age put to death. The massacre of the innocents, this has been called. The wise men followed the stars from the East, approximately 700 miles, arrived in Jerusalem and there inquired about the birthplace of the Messiah, and then went onto Bethlehem just a few miles from the holy city. The behavior of the wise men says that they were so sold on the value of their search that no amount of inconvenience or passage of time was allowed to deter them from their quest.

Jesus himself taught that the intensity of our searching was a necessary condition for our finding. **"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9-10).** There is a reward for the seeker. Seeking is prerequisite to receiving.

Yet I wonder in the materialistic and increasing secular West, when comfort and pursuit of here and now predominates, where is the hunger for something more? Is it just below the surface and I am missing it, or is the search for the transcendent, just not there. The novelist Walker Percy in his book *Second Coming*, paints a bleak picture of the self consumed western person, **"The present unbeliever is crazy because he finds himself born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion of how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, works, grows old, gets sick and dies, and is quite content to have done so. Not once in his entire life does it cross his mind to say to himself that this situation is preposterous, that an explanation is due him. No, he takes his comfort and ease, plays along with the game, watches TV, drinks his drink, laughs, curses politicians, now and again to relieve boredom and the farce—goes off to war to shoot other people."**

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

It would appear that our efforts are put into feeling good and looking good, but not necessarily into being good or beholding to the Good. The Ledbetter dog showed up at the front door with a rabbit in his teeth—muddied and bloodied. Mrs. Ledbetter yelled across the house, “Mr. Ledbetter get out here, your dog has killed this rabbit.” Mr. Ledbetter immediately recognized this as the prize winning rabbit of the next door neighbors. He scolded the dog. He took the rabbit into the bathroom, washed off the mud and the blood stains. He took out the blow drier, blow dried the bunny, so that it almost looked alive. At midnight he snuck over to the neighbors’ yard and put the rabbit back into the cage. The neighbors were scheduled to come over on Saturday for their usual morning coffee. The Ledbetter’s were sitting on the porch, when their next door neighbors arrived. The Ledbetters feigned innocence and said, “Well, how’s it going?” The neighbors said, “The strangest thing happened. Our prize rabbit died last week, we buried him and he showed up back in the pen looking like he has just come from the beauty parlor.” I thought, what a parable of our age. We are constantly blow drying the bunny, fluffing up death, and trying to pass it off as life.

What is wrong with us that we settle for so little? We go through life and never inquire as to how we got here, where we are going; is there a God to whom I might relate; what is that all about. Is there no wonder in our souls? C. S. Lewis put it like this, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are too easily pleased.”

It isn’t that our desire for pleasure is too strong, but too weak. We settle for a nice home, family, a few friends, a job, a plasma TV, an IPOD, dinners out, yearly vacation, a nice car, and God wants to give us Himself. What does Jesus promise for those who ask, seek, and knock, his very presence? “The heavenly Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask” (Luke 11:13).

Do we in the Christian community demonstrate a passion to know the living God? Is there a hunger in our souls that only God can satisfy? Is there a thirst that only a visitation of the Lord upon our spirits can parch? Have we asked God to put such an ache in us for Him that only He can soothe the pain?

These are the questions I have lived with on and off with greater or lesser intensity from the time I had one of the most formative epiphanies in my life. After five years in a pastorate in the San Jose area, I was granted a three-month sabbatical. Toward the end of that time I was challenged by a parishioner to go away on a silent retreat for a minimum of three days. Go away only with your Bible, devotional material, a hymnbook, and journal, and interact only with God

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

during that time. I can tell you, I was a little frightened. I knew I could last an hour, but then what would I do for the next 71 hours. I accepted the challenge and booked myself into a nearby Jesuit Retreat center. I came to that retreat with a question, "Lord, what is your vision for the church for the next five years?" I had been there five years, and as the senior pastor and spiritual leader, it seemed appropriate that I attempt to hear from the Lord a fresh vision as to where He might want to take us. As I settled into the quiet and began to consult the Lord about His vision, I heard the Lord turn the tables on me. In an almost audible manner, I heard a voice in me say, "Greg, you have the wrong question. The question is not what is my vision for you, but what is your vision of me?" That is a very different question. It haunts me and gnaws at me to this day as it should. This is where the passion, desire, and mystery reside.

Seeking, asking, and knocking are necessary conditions for the rewards God wants to give us, because it is a process of emptying. The long journey of the wise men was part of their preparation to receive. It is only in the tenacious pursuit that we get in touch with our spiritual bankruptcy. It is when we are empty that we can be filled.

What makes for a satisfying search? 1. There is truth to be found—there is a destination, place to arrive. 2. It is worth seeking with all of our heart. And finally...

3. The search is complete in the presence of Christ.

The wise men's search found its joyful completion in worship before the Christ. Through the priests and teachers of the law, Herod informed them that Bethlehem was the location of the Messiah's birth, "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him" (Matthew 2:9-11).

The wise men's search followed the path of the way God reveals himself. First, God is known by natural revelation. God's eternal power and deity are clearly perceived in the created order. Paul would go so far as to say, "everyone intuitively knows that there is a creator and we are ultimately accountable to Him." Regardless of the intellectual smoke screens, everyone knows that an all powerful being of infinite intelligence and creativity is the author of it all. The Lord entered into the astrologers' view of the world in the form of a star they could follow. But this is not enough. Secondly, the wise men encountered revelation in the form of Scripture. When they consulted Herod, Herod consulted the priests and teachers of the law, who quoted Scripture from **Micah 5:2**, "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah..." But this is still not enough, the

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

Scriptures point to one person, Jesus Christ. It is all fulfilled in Him. It was Jesus after his resurrection who spoke to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. What did he say? **"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).** The third and ultimate way that God reveals himself is through the person of His Son. The journey ends and is complete as we bow before Jesus.

I suppose all of us have our most and least favorite Christmas carols. Here is my small Christmas paradox. The one that comes with my least favorite melody, contains my most favorite line—"O Little Town of Bethlehem". I hate the tune, but I love the theology. The last line of the first verse concludes, **"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."** All that we long for is fulfilled in Christ, while all of our anxieties are silenced in Him as well. We hope for love, we fear being alone; we hope to make a difference, we fear that we will leave no footprints in the sand; we hope for forgiveness from guilt, we fear that there is no rest for our conscience. The longings and the forebodings of humanity are completely addressed in Christ. **"The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."**

I have fond remembrances of a couple with whom I had the privilege of doing their premarital counseling and performing the wedding. They shared with me their remarkable spiritual journey together. They had a common gnawing emptiness that they were seeking to fulfill. The hole in their soul could not rest until they found the answer. Their first stop was religious science, which speaks of Jesus as the Christ idea, the divine spark, but not Jesus as the God-man. They made short stop there on the way to Eastern thought and the new age, which said that Christ is not out there somewhere, but in us all. We are the divine light; Jesus is a name for the divinity within us. That had a fascination, but it too wore off. Scientology offered to get rid of all the negative energy in their system. The E-meter that promised to rid them of negative vibes only lowered their bank account. Finally, the journey ended in joy. Jesus Christ made himself known. Only when their hearts were taken captive in love, the spirit cleansed from true guilt, did they know that they were home, finally home.

The wise men found that Christmas means that Jesus is the center of it all. Brennan Manning put it this way: **"What am I doing walking around this planet? Why do I exist?"** The answer must be, **"For the sake of Christ."** If the universe were suddenly to become articulate, from north to south and east to west, we would hear, **"we exist for the sake of Christ."** From the seas to the valleys; tapped out in the pattering rain, written on the lightning in the sky, the mountains would echo back, **"we exist for the sake of Christ."**

As a sign of gratitude the wise men offered gifts to the child-king, **"Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense**

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

and of myrrh" (Matthew 2:11b). The oriental custom was to give valuable gifts to any dignitary. This is the hospitality of the culture. They gave gold as due royalty; frankincense, a sweet perfume offered with temple sacrifices as a sign of Jesus' divinity; and myrrh, a rare spice from an Arabian shrub used for embalming. The myrrh was the sign that this baby was born to die. When all that you longed for is found, is there a gift too valuable to offer? "All that we are or ever hope to be we owe it all to thee."

What is the old joke: Why is it that you always find what you are looking for in the last place you look? Answer: When you find it, you stop looking. What makes the search fulfilling? There is a destination; it is worth all that we have; and it ends at the feet of Jesus. Are we ready to enter 2007 with the Lord's question, "What is your vision of me?"

For when we arrive at the end of the journey, a new one has just begun, because our life is sent in an entirely different direction. You can't meet Jesus and keep going the same way. Our passage concludes, "They returned to their country by another route." What is that route for us in 2007? Will it be all a consuming desire or same ole, same ole?