

“THE SEARCH FOR JESUS” **(Matthew 2:1-12)**

Merry Christmas, it's good to have you with us on Christmas Sunday as we turn our thoughts towards the real meaning of Christmas and celebrating the birthday of our Savior. This morning I want to talk to you about the search for Jesus. How many of you spent time this week searching for something around your house? It is said that we spend between 10-30 minutes a day looking for lost or misplaced items. The top five items men look for in their homes are clean socks, car keys, cell phones, fingernail clippers, and the remote control. For women, the top five items are shoes, a child's toy, wallet, lipstick and cell phone. Altogether, experts say that we spend about one whole year of our life searching for something.

In recent years the term “spiritual seeker” has become a popular way to describe people on a quest to find answers to the big questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? In the Bible God makes an incredible promise to seekers when He says, “If you seek the Lord your God, you will find Him if you look for Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 4:29). This is no better illustrated than in the story of the wise men, called Magi, who sought diligently for Jesus, and at the end of a long journey found Him.

Their story is found in Matthew 2:1-2 where we read this account:

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.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

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 worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

A few misconceptions about these wise men have become popular over the years, and one is that there were three of them. It's probably due to the fact that they gave Jesus three gifts and that someone wrote a song called “We Three Kings.” But we're never told how many there were. There could have been three or thirty or a hundred.

Another misconception is that these wise men arrived the night Jesus was born. In our Nativity scenes we place the wise men in the stable around the baby Jesus along with the shepherds and the angels. But all indications are that they visited Jesus at a later time. Matthew tells us that they visited Jesus in a “house” instead of a stable, and that Jesus was a “child” instead of a newborn – probably between 12 to 24 months old. But it’s okay if you want to keep the wise men in your nativity scene since they are part of the larger Christmas story – you might just want to back them up a few inches.

There is a great deal of mystery surrounding these men. Most translations call them Magi, while the KJV refers to them as wise men. They were the professors and philosophers of their day, most likely from Persia or Babylon, which is modern day Iran or Iraq. They were highly educated scholars who were trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were the kind of guys you’d find on Jeopardy and belonging to Mensa. They were considered wise men because they thought deeply about life. They were also trained in what we would call astrology. Back then, astrology was connected with people’s search for God. The ancients studied the skies in order to find answers to the great questions of life.

The Magi concluded that the answer to the questions they were asking was found in a person – the one born king of the Jews. The mystery is how they knew about a Jewish king when they lived more than 1000 miles from Israel, in a completely different culture? How did they know that the Messiah had been born? The answer probably lies in the fact that over 500 years earlier the nation of Babylon – where the Magi were from – conquered the southern part of Israel and carried the Israelites off into captivity. So the Magi, in their quest for learning, no doubt heard about the God of Israel and the Messiah who was to come. One of the Jewish captives taken to Babylon was a teenager named Daniel, who became an important leader in Babylon and was used of God to record future prophecies, some of which were about Jesus.

One of the most amazing prophecies in the Bible is found in Daniel 9 where he talks about a period of 483 weeks. Daniel prophesied that from the time an announcement was given to rebuild Jerusalem, until the Messiah would be “cut off” (that is crucified), would total 483 years. History tells us that in 444 B.C. King Cyrus of Persia, who had knocked off the kingdom of Babylon, issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. From that date until 33 A.D., when Jesus was crucified, was exactly 483 years (using the Jewish calendar).

The book of Daniel refers to the Magi fourteen times, which means they heard this prophecy, and scholars believe that generations of Magi had been studying Daniel’s prophecy and knew the approximate time frame in which the king of the Jews would be born. They were on the lookout and knew through Bible prophecy the time was at hand. How cool is that?

Another mystery is how the Magi were able to find Jesus. When they left Persia, they didn’t have Google maps or a GPS, instead they had a star they followed a star in the western sky. **SHOW SLIDE**. Deep thinkers and scientists have spent a great deal of time trying to explain the nature of this star. Some astronomers theorize that at this time, several planets came into alignment in relation to earth and would have created what appeared to be an extremely bright star. Others suggest it was a comet, or the emergence of a super-nova. But the best explanation is that it was a supernatural light from God custom made for these wise men to guide them on their search – kind of like in the Old Testament when God provided a pillar of fire to guide the Israelites through the darkness at night. Since the wise men were students of the sky, it made perfect sense for God to use a star or light to get the attention of these seekers.

The star led them to Jerusalem. They knew that a baby had been born, but they didn't know where. Jerusalem was the logical place – it was the capital city where the king of the Jews would rule and reign. The arrival of these dignitaries in Jerusalem was no small event. The town was abuzz, especially when they started to ask where the one born king of the Jews was. No one seemed to know. King Herod caught wind that the Magi were in town asking about a Jewish king and in his mind, there was only one king and you're looking at him.

So they asked, "Where is he? Where is the one who has been born of the Jews?" Their question caught King Herod off guard. "King? Why, you're looking at the king." Herod was an extremely arrogant, prideful man who had already murdered his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, one of his wives and three of his sons because he was afraid they might take his throne. No wonder he was troubled to hear about yet another rival.

Since no one seemed to know the answer to where the Messiah was to be born, Herod called in the Jewish priests and teachers and asked them. "That's easy," they said. "In Bethlehem, the city of David, just seven miles down the road. The prophet Micah prophesied this centuries ago." Here the Magi had traveled 1000 miles across the desert to worship the Messiah, but the religious leaders had not bothered to walk but seven miles to see the Messiah for themselves. They had head knowledge of Jesus, but they were not seeking Him with their hearts.

Herod secretly called the Magi back in and said, "I have an answer for you. The "child" you're looking for is in Bethlehem, just to the south. So go and make a careful search for Him, and by the way, when you find Him come back and tell me where He is so that I too may worship Him." This was Herod's way of saying, "Let me know where He is so I can kill Him, just as I have killed anyone else who threatens to take my throne."

As the Magi set out for the last, short leg of their journey to Bethlehem, the star they saw in the east suddenly reappeared and went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where Jesus was. They could hardly contain themselves – they were overjoyed. After centuries of searching by other Magi, after a long, arduous trip, after diligently seeking the Messiah in Jerusalem, they at last had arrived at the very home of the Christ child. Their journey was over.

When they came to the home they saw a very common house, an ordinary mom and dad in Mary and Joseph, and a very normal looking little boy in Jesus. There was nothing to make them think that He was a king. And yet the wise men knew that this little boy was the Messiah, the Son of God, and they bowed down and worshipped. It didn't matter that they were wealthy, highly intelligent, highly-guarded men – they knew that this child would one day rule the world and they were not ashamed to fall on their faces before Him.

SHOW SLIDE. In ancient culture bringing gifts was important when approaching a superior and it's obvious that the wise men had given some thought as to what they would give to Jesus – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each of these gifts symbolized an important aspect of Jesus' life. Gold is the gift fit for a King. It speaks to Jesus' majesty. The wise men gave the most expensive gift they had in tribute to their king.

Frankincense was a very expensive fragrance used by priests in the temple, being a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Frankincense is a symbol of holiness and righteousness – picturing Jesus' willingness to give Himself sacrificially as a sacrifice to God.

Myrrh was a kind of perfume made from the leaves of a rose. In Jesus' day myrrh was a gift for someone who was going to die. After a person died, myrrh was used to anoint the body and prepare it for burial. The gospel of John tells us that after Jesus died, his body was wrapped in linen along with 75 pounds of myrrh and other spices. In giving the gift of myrrh the wise men recognized that Jesus, their king, would one day die.

The Magi gave the best of what they had, and their gifts said that Jesus was their King, He was God come to earth in human flesh, and that He would one day die for the sins of the world.

After they worshipped Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned to their country by another route. This verse has always intrigued me because I like to think that they not only went home a different way geographically, but they went home a different way spiritually. They met Jesus and they were never the same.

As we contemplate what this story means to us today, I want to share with you four important truths that emerge. The first is that **wise people seek God**. If you were looking for some of the least-likely people to find Christ, the wise men would be good candidates. From a worldly perspective the wise men didn't really need Christ – they had more than enough wealth to keep them financially secure and comfortable for the rest of their lives. Jesus said more than once that it is hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God because they put their trust in what they have accumulated.

The wise men had brains. They were the academic elite of their day. Just as wealth is a barrier to faith, so is intelligence. Many intellectuals demand absolute proof that there is a God. If I cannot scientifically put God in a test tube and prove beyond doubt that He exists, then it is foolish for me to believe something my mind cannot comprehend. But God has so designed life that we walk not by sight, but by faith. God delights in faith and rewards those who diligently seek Him. This faith is not blind faith, but faith built on solid evidence – evidence the wise men took time to research and put their faith in.

The wise men also had fame and respect. They were highly regarded by people. In our culture the more fame and admiration you have, such as a movie star or athlete, the less you seek after God. What makes these men so wise is that they had everything the world could offer – wealth, intelligence, and fame – yet they were humble enough to say, “There is something missing. There is something more to life.”

The French philosopher, Pascal, said that inside the heart of every man there is a “God-shaped vacuum.” Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has put “eternity in the hearts of men,” meaning that the longing for ultimate answers comes from God himself. God put that longing (the “God-shaped vacuum”) inside the human heart to cause men to look to Him. No one seeks God on their own, but God in His grace seeks us and draws us to Himself.

The second truth we learn from this story is that **if you follow God's light, you'll find Jesus**. It's quite remarkable that these men found Jesus, given the fact that they lived 1000 miles away in a pagan culture and not growing up without the Word of God, but by the grace of God they did. Sometimes people get tripped up on theological questions like, “What about people in far away, remote parts of the world who have never heard of Jesus – will God condemn them for what they didn't know?”

The answer is that every person instinctively knows there is a God just by looking at creation. God has made Himself known to every person. Romans 1:20 says, “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, so that men are without excuse.” All one had to do is look up into the sky at night and see the moon and the stars, or look out into the vast ocean or watch a sunset and see that there is a creator – there is a God.

God promises that if a person anywhere in the world searches for Him, He will be found. Deuteronomy 4:29, “If you seek the Lord your God, you will find Him if you look for Him with all your heart and with all your soul.” Jeremiah 29:13 says, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” In other words, if a person honestly seeks God, He will see to it that they find salvation in Christ. The wise men had the same general revelation of God’s creation as everyone else in the world had. Seeing their general belief, God then placed a special star up in the sky to guide them, and in faith they followed. Then He led them to Jerusalem where they received more revelation from God’s Word that Jesus was in Bethlehem. And finally God rewarded their faith by bringing them right to Jesus, where they bowed down and worshipped Him as their Savior from sin.

Not long ago I read a story about a pastor who was burdened to share Christ with the unsaved son of one of his long-time friends. The pastor wasn’t sure where his friend’s son lived anymore, but when he happened to be in the same city where the son had last lived, the pastor sensed the Holy Spirit saying, “I want you to find Him and share the good news of Christ with Him.” So the pastor looked his name up in the phone book and sure enough, he still lived there. So one evening he went over to this man’s apartment and knocked on the door. A man and his wife answered the door and invited him in. It didn’t take long for him to realize that he was at the wrong place. This man coincidentally had the same name as his friend’s son as well as the same address, but as he later found out, his friend’s son lived at the same address, only on the north side of town.

The pastor said, “I’m sorry to inconvenience you. I should be going.” As he was leaving, he noticed an open Bible on their table. He asked what they were reading, and they said that they had just recently begun reading the Bible, but could not understand some of the things it was saying. That evening, just before the pastor arrived, they told him, they had prayed, “God, if you will send someone to explain what it means to be a Christian, we will believe.”

This kind of thing happens more often than we think and reminds us that anyone who honestly seeks God will be found by Him. God is creative in the ways He breaks through to people who seem to be far from Him. He can use a star, a chance encounter, a conversation, a television show, or a song. People often seek God when there is a traumatic event – there is a death, a dream is shattered, or you’ve come to the end of your rope. You know something is missing. You know there is more to life. And God uses these experiences to draw us to Himself so that we might experience His forgiveness and find real life in Christ.

The third truth we learn from this story is that **God most often uses you and me as His light to direct people to Christ.** God no longer places lights in the sky to guide people to Jesus. Instead He places us in the pathway of people to guide them to Jesus. Daniel 12:3 says, “Those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars for ever and ever.” When you guide someone to Jesus, you’re one of God’s stars. For thousands of years, mariners and other explorers depended on the stars for navigation. They would take bearing on those stars and then know they were going in the right direction. That’s the way we ought to be. People without Jesus aren’t consciously looking for Jesus – they are looking at us.

Stars shine when it's dark – the darker the night, the brighter the star shines. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:15-16, “As children of God live without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.” As our world gets spiritually darker and darker, God wants us to let our light shine for Jesus – at work, at school, in your home, in your neighborhood – wherever there is darkness be a light that points people to Christ.

The fourth and most important truth in this story is that **how you respond to God's light determines your eternal destiny**. King Herod had every opportunity to worship and receive the one true King, but he was blinded by his pride. No one is going to sit on the throne of my life! He saw Jesus as a threat to his power, his wealth, and his lifestyle. He not only rejected Jesus, but he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old or younger in an attempt to destroy Jesus. Herod had everything a person could want on earth, but He missed the most important thing – He missed Jesus and the joy of having a personal relationship with Him, having his sins forgiven, and spending eternity in heaven.

The religious leaders were given an abundance of light. They had the scriptures right at their fingertips with all the prophecies that pointed to Jesus, but they didn't respond to the light given them. The wise men traveled 1000 miles across a desert to see Jesus, but the Jews who should have known all about His birth did not even bother to make the seven mile walk to Bethlehem to see Him. They had head knowledge but not a desire in their heart to seek Jesus. They knew all about Jesus, but they didn't know Jesus as a person.

The wise men, however, acted upon the light God gave them, and as they stepped out in faith God gave them more light, and that light led to Jesus, the light of the world. God's gives each one of us the same amount of light. No one can stand before God and say they didn't know about Him, because if we respond to the light, He gives it will lead us to Jesus.

Perhaps you are a spiritual seeker this morning – there are circumstances in your life that have caused you to ask the big questions of life – and the Bible makes it clear that no matter what your questions are – the answer is Jesus. The story of the Bible is that our world is messed up because of sin and rebellion against God, and that our sin has separated us from a Holy God. God loved us too much to let us die in our sins so He sent us a Savior – someone to live with us and be like us, only without sin – someone to die in our place so that the penalty of sin would be paid once and for all and a relationship with God would be reestablished by anyone who would place their faith in His Son Jesus.

Wise men – wise people – still seek the Lord and if you seek Him God promises that you will find Him – you'll find Jesus – you'll find the answer – the truth will be revealed to you – and if you respond in faith and trust Christ to save you from your sin – He will forgive you and make you right with God.