

What are you searching for?

The Child in the Manger – The True Meaning of Christmas

Matthew 2:1-12

January 7, 2018

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “‘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 shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

This morning is the conclusion to our Advent and Christmas series entitled *The Child in the Manger – The True Meaning of Christmas*. Interwoven in this year’s series has been the question from the popular Christmas hymn, “What Child is This?” Within the lyrics of that famous Christmas hymn about the baby Jesus who was born in the manger in Bethlehem we encounter the people and their actions that were present at Jesus’ birth which help us answer that question, “What Child is This? There is Mary, Jesus’ mother. There is the shepherds. While the wisemen or magi are not specifically mentioned by name, they are alluded to by the gifts that they brought and their action of worship, *So bring him incense, gold and myrrh*.

The story of the wisemen is unique to Matthew’s gospel. Though we are never told exactly how many there were, we just assume that there were three by the number of gifts, we are told quite a bit else about them. First, we are told where they came from. They came “from the east.” “From the east” is significant. “From the east” would have been a term that referred to places east of the Jordan River. It still holds meaning to this day. “West of the Jordan River” is an area represented mostly by Jews, while “east of the Jordan River” is represented mostly by non-Jews, referred to mostly as Gentiles in Jesus’ day and as Palestinian’s and/or Muslims today. Most likely this group of men came from the far east, the area known as Arabia. The gifts that they brought were found mostly in the Arabian Peninsula and it all fit the prophecy of Isaiah from some 600-700 years earlier, found in Isaiah 60:1-6: *Your sons will come from afar . . . with camels of Midian, Ephah and Sheba they shall come, bringing gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news,*

the praises of the Lord. The ancient lands of Midian, Ephah and Sheba were all located in the Arabian Peninsula.

It also tells us early on in our passage this morning, that no matter how many of them there were, they were “Magi.” Well, that title has been translated in many different ways over the centuries, hence we get phrases like “the three wisemen” and “the three kings.” Most likely they were not actually kings as we understand kings to be today. They were most likely a combination of philosophers (hence the term “wisemen”), astronomers (“magi” where we get the word magician today), and searchers or seekers. They searched whatever they could – books, the Jewish Scriptures, the sky, wherever they could to find answers to life’s questions. The gifts that they brought represent the fact that at least some of them had to be pretty wealthy, and where they were from points to the fact that they were most likely Gentiles, non-Jews. But they knew the Jewish Scriptures because they were well aware of where the Messiah was to be born.

What all this really points to is the fact that this group of men represents a completely different group of people than that which is represented by the shepherds which we looked at on Christmas Eve. The shepherds, though probably not very faithful or practicing Jews, were most likely made up of Jewish men who were from the Jewish land around Bethlehem and Jerusalem. They were most likely uneducated and poor, or at best middle and working class. Uneducated, poor, working class & Jewish. Contrast that to the Magi – highly educated, rich and Gentile. Proof that Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, came to save everyone for their sins.

Perhaps what is most interesting about the nativity story is that it is non-Jews that went searching first to find the Messiah who had been born. Yes, the shepherds who were most likely from Jewish background were the first to find him, but they had to be awakened by the host of angels on that 1st Christmas Eve. They hadn’t been looking or searching on their own.

As it says in the beginning of the gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, yet his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. John 1:1-2, 9-12

Jesus came to seek and save the lost, whether Jew or Gentile. One of the most important requirements to being saved by Jesus is you need to know that you are lost. Jesus himself said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick . . . For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:12-13). Jesus has nothing to offer those who are not lost. And if one knows he or she is lost, then he or she is usually seeking or searching to be found. Unless you are a male who is lost driving a car, then you might be lost and searching or seeking but you are not going to admit it ☺ Which might speak more to our entire human condition, male and female, than we would like to admit.

The magi or the wisemen represent something very significant to all human beings. What are we seeking or searching for? God has placed something inside of each and every one of us that draws us to Him. Some people call it seeking or searching, others might call it desire. For a year and a half now I have been participating in what is called “The Transforming Community” in Chicago with 70 other pastors and Christian leaders, from not only around the country but around the world, and the primary question we have all be grappling with is, “what is my primary desire?” “What is it that I long for the most?” The assumption is that if I can answer that question, than pretty much everything else should fall into place. The problem is we all have misplaced desires: our misplaced desires might be in our relationships – a boy friend or girlfriend, husband or wife; it might be in our children; or in knowledge, education or degrees; sex; drugs; possessions, things, money; long life here on earth; sports; work or our job; the need to be in control; food; a comfortable lifestyle; retirement and on and on and on.

Addiction to anything is a misplaced desire. There are socially acceptable misplaced desires and there are socially unacceptable misplaced desires. Even within the same categories. Some misplaced sexual desires are acceptable by our culture while others are not. Some misplaced desires for gambling are acceptable in our culture today, while others are not. Even misplaced desire for escape through drugs – some is acceptable in our culture while others are not. Mary thinks one of my misplaced desires is having to watch so much hockey during the winter season, while I wonder about her need to watch so many Hallmark movies. Fortunately God has blessed us with more than one television. You see, just about anything can become a misplaced desire, yet in and of themselves, many of the things I listed are not bad things. But none of those things will ever completely fulfill the desire that God has put inside of us because that desire can only be fulfilled by God.

Perhaps the greatest and most truthful quote of all time, at least outside the Bible, is that of Augustine who lived in late 300, early 400 A.D. – “You have made us for yourself O Lord and our soul is restless until it comes to rest in you.” From a much more contemporary Christian, the author of “Desiring God,” John Piper says, “God is most glorified in and through his people when we are most satisfied in him.”

I am currently reading a book which John Piper wrote after *Desiring God*, kind of a sequel entitled When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy. Sometimes desiring God and finding joy doesn't come easy, so much so that we have to fight for it. David, the man referred to in the Bible as a man after God's own heart, wrote in Psalm 16:11, “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” Psalm 91 begins, “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” The people of O.T. times, like David, could only find true and lasting joy in God's presence. In N.T. times we can only find true and lasting joy in the presence of Jesus Christ. How do we know when we have really found it? When we're willing to give up everything else and/or everything else pales in comparison to it, exemplified by Jesus' parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl:

*“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then **in his joy** went and sold all he had and bought the field.*

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” Matthew 13:44-46

There is a difference between desire and delight. Desire is what we experience when the thing that we hope or long for is not present, or not quite fully present. Delight is a strong feeling of happiness (joy); something that gives you great pleasure and satisfaction.

In Jesus, Emmanuel, God among us, we find both. He is present with us through his coming as the child in the manger 2,000 years ago, his death on the cross and his resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit, and He is not quite fully present. That comes for believers only when we are taken up at the end of our life here on earth or when Jesus returns.

Piper writes, “In other words, desire is a form of the very pleasure that is anticipated with the arrival of the thing desired. It is, you might say, the pleasure itself experienced in the form of anticipation.

Hence, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, his early followers could say, “we rejoice in the Lord” (Phil. 3:1) and “we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2), despite their many sufferings, hardships, persecutions, and even death here on earth.

Piper goes on (and I am quoting him at length because there is certainly no way I can put it in better words:

“Our calling here is to fight for joy –our and the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. The aim is that God’s worth, his infinite desirability – be known and prized in all the world. This is what we mean by God being glorified. **He is most glorified in and through his people when we are most satisfied in him.**

“The intensity of our pleasure and our desire bear witness of his worth to the world, especially when we are freed by this (present and hoped for) pleasure to leave the pleasures of this world for a life of sacrifice and love for others...”

“Our chief end is to glorify God, the great Object. We do so most fully when we treasure him, desire him, delight in him so supremely that we let goods and kindred go and display his love to the poor and the lost.”

The beloved disciple John wrote in his 1st letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world . . . is not of the Father but of the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. 1 John 2:15-17 (NIV)

God’s ultimate will for our lives is that we love Him, God our Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. It says further along in Psalm 91, which is fast becoming my favorite Psalm, “*Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he has known my name.*” Jesus said, recorded in John 8:42, “*If God were your Father, you would love me,*” which means if you flip it around, “if you love Jesus then God is your Father.” Or to take it even further, “if you don’t love Jesus, then God is not your Father.”

The disciple Peter wrote in his 1st letter: *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with inexpressible joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* 1 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV)

Not just deciding for Jesus, or saying “I have accepted Jesus into my heart,” or affirming all the right doctrines about him, or coming to church so many times a year or even all of your life, or doing lots of good works in his Name is what gets us into heaven. Loving Jesus is the only thing that gets us there.

Piper says, “Loving Christ involves delight in his Person. Without this love no one goes to heaven. Therefore there is no more important struggle in the universe than the struggle to see and savor Christ above all things – the struggle for joy.”

The wisemen, or magi, or kings, whatever, whoever and how many ever there were are examples of those who went searching and seeking, they desired to find the only thing, the only one, who can fulfill the ultimate desire that God has placed in each of us, His own Son, Jesus, born in the manger. And when they found Him, they were filled with joy, so much so that they bowed down and worshiped Him, giving Him gifts of great value that represent all the things of this world that are of lesser value, giving glory to God the Father. That is the true meaning of Christmas.

What’s the application of the message this morning?

Well, here we are just after the start of the New Year. A time when many spend some time looking at their life, perhaps even making a few New Year’s resolutions – many which mean very little in the big picture of our lives – they have no eternal value. But what if each of us made the New Year’s resolution to focus on our relationship with Jesus Christ? How much do we desire and delight in Him? Do we delight and desire in Him so much that in the presence of others we bring glory to God His Father? Have we experienced the joy that only He can give, and if not, are we willing to seek and search and fight for it?

This morning is Epiphany Sunday on the Christian calendar, the day in which the Christian church around the world celebrates the day when Jesus Christ, was manifest, made known to the wisemen – Gentiles, signifying that Jesus Christ came to save all people.

It is appropriate that we celebrate it on the 1st Sunday of each new year, because it is a reminder that as Christians, God is making himself known to each one of us through Jesus Christ, each and every day. As Christians God doesn’t promise that there will be no more struggles, no more pain, no more sin, no more death here on earth, or no more darkness. What He does promise is to walk with us in the midst of that darkness.

I close this morning with an Epiphany prayer – original author unknown:

*O God, who am I now?
Once, I was secure
in familiar territory
in my sense of belonging*

unquestioning of

the norms of my culture

the assumptions built into my language

the values shared by my society.

But now you have called me out and away from home

and I do not know where you are leading.

I am empty, unsure, uncomfortable.

I have only a beckoning star to follow.

Journeying God,

pitch your tent with mine

so that I may not become deterred

by hardship, strangeness, doubt.

Show me the movement I must make

toward a wealth not dependent on possessions

toward a wisdom not based on books

toward a strength not bolstered by my might

toward a God not confined to heaven

but scandalously earthed, poor, unrecognized . . .

Help me find myself as I walk yoked with you.

In the Name of Jesus we pray, Amen.