

SERIES: Advent 2005

SERMON: Wise Men Still Seek Him

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-12

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The religious elite—both liberal and conservative—were all antagonistic or skeptical or ignorant or apathetic to the news of the first coming of Christ. Initially only shepherds and Magi eagerly sought him, and both groups were outcasts to the conservative religious people of the day. Our particular focus this morning is going to be on the Magi. My strong suspicion is that they were not, as commonly believed, three godly kings culminating a life of holiness with a pilgrimage to Bethlehem. Rather they were pagan astrologers looked down upon by the Jewish religious establishment of that day.

Yet, despite their less than stellar background (sorry about the pun), the Magi sought the truth and sought the Messiah, and because of that God responded to their seeking and immortalized them in His Word. The fact is that God always responds to true seekers. Deuteronomy 4:29 says, “You will seek the Lord your God and you *will* find Him *if* you search for Him with all your heart and with all your soul.” This verse teaches that God is findable and He is knowable. Of course, basic and foundational to all of our seeking for God is the fact that He first chooses us and seeks us out. Nevertheless God is pleased when we seek Him and He has promised to honor our seeking by disclosing Himself to us.

Possibly the best-known seekers in the whole Bible are the Magi who came from the East looking for the Messiah who was born “King of the Jews.” We don’t know a lot about the Magi. However, it is clear that they were foreigners, they were without proper religious credentials, and they were practitioners of astrology, which was not only rejected by the Jews but even forbidden in the Scriptures. Yet, when they sought God He answered them.

Throughout the Scriptures this same theme is sounded, namely that it is not the credentialed, respected, politically correct, and morally self-righteous whom God accepts. Rather it is the one who comes to the realization that he’s on a dead-end path and repents of the direction he is going. I want us to read Matthew 2:1-12 this morning—the only place in the Bible the Magi are mentioned. Therefore, all we know for sure about them comes from this passage:

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.

Obviously, much that we have accepted about the Magi is nothing more than early church tradition or speculation. In nativity scenes the Magi are commonly represented as three kings gathered around the baby Jesus at the stable. But we cannot be sure that there were three of them (only that there were three gifts); almost certainly they were not kings; nor did they present their gifts to the baby at the stable—they arrived months after his birth when his parents were in a house.

Among the other legends perpetrated about the magi are the following: their names were Melchior, Belthasar, and Caspar; one came from India, one from Egypt, and one from Greece; they were later baptized by St. Thomas; their bones were discovered by St. Helena, deposited in the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople, transferred to Malan, and finally came to rest in the great Cathedral of Cologne, where you can see them today. Oh yes, Ed Pointer emailed me recently with an additional little-known “fact” about the Magi. It is told in the first person:

In a small Southern town there was a "Nativity Scene" that showed great skill, and talent had gone into creating it. One small feature bothered me. The three wise men were wearing firemen's helmets. Totally unable to come up with a reason or explanation, I left.

At a "Quick Stop" on the edge of town, I asked the lady behind the counter about the helmets. She exploded into a rage, yelling at me, "You Yankees never do read the Bible, do you!" I assured her that I did, but simply couldn't recall anything about firemen in the Bible.

She jerked her Bible from behind the counter and ruffled through some pages, and finally jabbed her finger at a passage. Sticking it in my face she said, "See, it says right here, 'The three wise men came from afar.'"

I think we are probably better off if we stick with the Scriptures.

The word Magi means “court astrologer.” Magi served as advisors to kings, making forecasts and predictions for their royal patrons based on their study of the stars, about which they were quite knowledgeable. But God did not approve star study for the purpose of predicting the future; in fact, He rebuked it strongly, as in Isaiah 47:13-15. Yet because these pagan astrologers knew no better, God allowed them to find Him this way.

For the Magi this particular search was very unusual—it was for a king whose name they did not know and whose throne was as yet unacknowledged. In fact, the king had just been born.

The Magi sought intelligently.

Look at verse 1: “Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’” We don’t know the Magi’s country of origin; all we know is that they were from “the East,” and the impression is that it was a considerable distance. It seems likely that when the Jews were deported from Palestine by Shalmaneezer the Assyrian and Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian in the 8th and 6th centuries, B.C., respectively, they spread their Messianic expectations all through the East, including Babylonia and Persia. Perhaps these particular Magi became aware of such expectations. So when Messiah’s star appeared, they set out to honor the newborn “King of the Jews,” and naturally headed for the Holy Land.

A lot of speculation has been made about this Star. Why is it called “Messiah's star,” and how did the Magi recognize it as such? What sort of celestial phenomenon was it? These are hard questions to answer, but some very interesting works have been written about it. Dr. Craig Chester, President of the Monterey Institute for Research in Astronomy, has written cogently of many of the possibilities and has opted for a conjunction of planets and stars. He observes that in September of 3-4 B.C., which would be very close to the time of Christ’s birth, there was a series of close conjunctions involving Jupiter, the planet that represented kingship, and Regulus, the star of kingship. Regulus itself was the brightest star in the constellation of Leo, which was associated with the Lion of Judah. In other words, the royal planet approached the royal star in the royal constellation representing Israel.

Dr. Chester goes on to suggest that this astronomical event, as profound as it may have been to the Magi, may not have been very obvious to the average person. Had it been an incomparably bright object, Herod would have known of it and there would be numerous written records of it. It is much more plausible that Messiah’s star went unnoticed by all but a few experts such as the Magi.

Now I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that there must be a natural, scientific explanation for this star. I think it is possible that God created a unique celestial phenomenon, and it may have been seen only by the Magi, but it is also possible that God used natural events to announce the coming of His Son and to lead these foreign visitors to Him.

Please note that Matthew seems to report two separate sightings of the star, possibly with months intervening. The first appearance was when the Magi saw the star rising in the east. There is no indication that the Star actually led them to Palestine; it may have simply marked the fact of Messiah’s birth. The reason the Magi headed for Jerusalem may have been simply that it was the capital city of the Jews and was the intelligent place to start such a search. When they arrived in the Holy City the Magi inquired as to where the One born King of the Jews might be. Not for a moment do they express any doubt with reference to the *fact* of His birth. They do not even doubt as to *when*. For them the only question is *where*?

Had they been following the star continuously, as is commonly thought, there would have been no point in stopping in Jerusalem at all to seek information about the exact location of the new king; they could have simply continued directly to Bethlehem. However, once they are told the place of Messiah's birth, the star apparently reappears and begins to lead them the rest of the way. Here's what verse 9 says: "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."

My main point is that the Magi sought intelligently. One of the lessons we can learn from them is that an intelligent search often involves questions. Just as the Magi were not ashamed to reveal their ignorance of prophecy in a desire to find the truth, so people today should never be ashamed to ask questions about faith and eternity and ultimate truth. There is no such thing as a stupid question if it is an honest one.

But to whom are we directing our ultimate questions? Where do we go when we are clueless or puzzled? Some seek the psychic hotline, or astrological charts, or the science classroom, or cultural consensus. I submit to you that God wants us to direct our ultimate questions to Him. How? First, by searching the Scriptures. The chief priests and teachers of the law found the answer to the Magi's questions by searching the Scriptures. Should we do less?

But we should also talk to God in prayer; He is not afraid of our questions; nor is He irritated by them. Remember the early words in James? "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask *God*, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." Seeking intelligently means going to the right source with our questions.

The Magi sought diligently. (3-9)

Distance meant nothing to them; cost was not considered; danger was irrelevant. They would not be deterred by obstacles. Consider, for example, the obstacle of Herod's secret plotting against the newborn Messiah. Herod is one of the sorriest characters in the Bible, in fact, in all of human history. At the time of Jesus' birth Herod the Great was about 70 years old and probably in the last months of his life. He had ruled the Jews from 37-4 B.C. even though he had no legitimate claim to the throne. He wasn't even Jewish; he was an Edomite.

Herod spent years consolidating his power, but because he had never been accepted as their legitimate ruler by the Jews, he became extremely paranoid and used intrigue and murder to turn aside anyone suspected of having designs on his throne. He even murdered three of his own sons, to say nothing of several of his wives, because he suspected them of plotting against him. And not long after the events recorded in Matthew 2, Herod had all the wealthy and influential men in Jerusalem incarcerated together in the Jerusalem hippodrome. He then ordered his guards to be prepared at the moment of his own death to butcher all these great men of Jerusalem so that there would be great mourning on the day of his death. None other than the emperor in Rome himself had remarked of Herod, "Better to be one of Herod's pigs than his son."

It says in verse 3 that Herod was “disturbed” when the Magi came and asked about the birth of a king. That’s an understatement! Actually the Greek literally reads that he was “terrified,” that he “began to shake.” His terror at the thought of a mere infant eventually becoming king of the Jews in his place leads him to a very diabolical plot—the murder of the innocents in Bethlehem. In the meanwhile he is not above hypocrisy, feigning a desire to come and worship the child himself. Herod, of course, does not know where the child is, but the Magi patiently wait until the chief priests and teachers of the law are consulted. The unanimous judgment is handed down: “in Bethlehem of Judea.”

Actually this conclusion wasn’t too difficult because the OT clearly predicted His place of birth in Micah 5:2. Here is what the prophet wrote hundreds of years earlier, as quoted in verse 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.”¹ Though Bethlehem was a fairly common name (meaning house of bread), the prophet left no ambiguity as to which Bethlehem he meant—the one in Judea. So the Magi’s diligent search leads them out of Jerusalem, over a short, hilly road of about five miles, to the little town of Bethlehem.

Are you searching diligently for spiritual answers today? Does the uncertainty of a world at war, of expected terrorist attacks, or of earthquakes and tsunamis and tornadoes and hurricanes depress or perplex you? Ever wonder whether there will ever really be peace on earth? Have you given up on finding answers? Maybe you’ve heard the Christmas story so many times that it has become just a pleasant myth rather than the single most profound answer to the problem of human existence ever expressed—God becoming man so that man might have forgiveness of sins and an eternal relationship with God. It’s not too late to search diligently.

The Magi sought joyfully. (10)

Verse 10 reads, “When they saw the star they were overjoyed.” The star which had earlier informed them of the birth of Messiah now reappears, and it actually seems to go ahead of them until it stops still over the place where the child is. The anticipation nearly overwhelms them, and they rejoice exceedingly with great joy. They know that very soon they will pay homage to the King they are seeking.

The point I would like for us to contemplate here is that the Advent Season, above all else, should be a time of joy and rejoicing. I’ll bet it is that for the children among us this morning. I remember the overwhelming excitement I experienced as a child awaiting Christmas, and it wasn’t excitement about the gifts I would receive because we were very poor and there wasn’t much under the tree. It was more joy at seeing my family members open the gifts I had purchased or made for them. While they didn’t cost much I had made a great personal investment of time in finding them or making them. Besides, my parents always made a special effort to keep us focused on the Savior of Christmas.

However, for millions of people this season is not a time of joy, but the opposite—a time of deep depression. Psychologists and psychiatrists often have their busiest schedules just before and just

after Christmas. Among the reasons why people are hurting at this time of year are loneliness, feelings of inadequacy, fatigue because of increased pressures in life, and grief for relatives who have died and will be missing as families sit down for Christmas. I have a great deal of sympathy for such people.

But Christmas is also a downer for many people who don't struggle with any of these legitimate issues but have simply made poor choices. Maybe they've allowed the holidays to become a time of frantic activity—decorating, cooking, shopping, trying to find the right gift for family members who already have everything, fighting the crowds at the mall, enduring in-laws and outlaws and other irregular people at endless, fattening holiday gatherings. Whenever we allow even the good things about Christmas—like generous gift-giving and family get-togethers—to become the entire focal point of the season, we are setting ourselves up to miss the great joy and rejoicing that is available from contemplation of Christ's entrance into this world.

The Magi sought successfully. (11)

Verse 11: “On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary.” You will note that by the time the Magi arrive, Jesus is no longer a baby in a manger in a stable. He is probably several months old at least, perhaps a year or two, and the family is staying in a house. The key point, however, is that the journey of the Magi is complete; their search has been successful.

I want you to know that every search for God is successful if it is sincere and diligent. Remember the verse we started with? Deut. 4:29: “You will seek the Lord your God and you will find Him *if* you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.” God is not playing hard to get; He is not hiding from us; on the contrary, He has left His fingerprints everywhere around us. But He leaves an “out” for those who do not want to believe. His existence and work is not so obvious that people are forced to believe. The faith factor is critical. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For by grace are you saved, through faith”—not through sight or logical proof or scientific evidence, but by faith.

Faith may be defined as “believing what God says about the unseen based upon His absolute truthfulness about the visible.” Another person defined it as “believing what He says about the future based upon His absolute truthfulness about the past.” Everyone lives by faith: some live by faith in human intellect; some by faith in the almighty dollar; some by faith in esoteric philosophies; and some by faith in religion. But the wise person lives by faith in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Magi worshiped when they found the One they sought. (11,12)

We read in verse 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 and of incense and of myrrh.” Gold we know about. It is symbolic of royalty and is a tacit acknowledgment by the Magi that this child is a King. But frankincense and myrrh are little-known substances to most of us. They are both gum resins from bush-like trees. Tapped in

the summer so that the resin will ooze out and dry, the “tears” of resin are collected in the fall. In ancient times the raw products were shipped over various land and sea routes, and the peril and difficulty of the trip drove the cost way up. The end product was \$300-500 per pound.

Frankincense was used primarily as an incense, although it was also used in medical practice. Most scholars see it as symbolic of the deity of Christ. Myrrh, on the other hand, was highly prized in making perfumes and ointments. It was also used to prepare bodies for burial. Most take it as symbolic of Christ's humanity.

Gold, frankincense, myrrh; Royalty, deity, humanity. It has been suggested that perhaps Joseph and Mary used these treasures to finance their flight to Egypt when they fled from Bethlehem to escape Herod's sword. Be that as it may, the anonymous Magi returned to their own country, warned by God of Herod's devices. But for nearly 2,000 years all the world has paused to honor the One they sought and to worship the One they worshiped.

Conclusion: I want to return once more to the verse I started with this morning, Deut. 4:29: “You will seek the Lord your God and you will find Him *if* you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.” Friends, that promise is as good today as it was when Moses wrote it 14 centuries before Christ. The same message was also given by the prophet Isaiah about seven centuries before Christ. In Isaiah 55:1-3 we read these great verses:

*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not
satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.*

Here we find God offering His salvation to the thirsty, the poor, and the disillusioned. That represents most of the human race; spiritually it represents all of us. God urges us to listen to Him so that our souls may live. But He makes it clear that His salvation cannot be purchased with money; nor can it be earned through good deeds. It is a free gift. Yet it does have a prerequisite attached, which we read about in verse 6:

*Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the Lord.*

Repentance is the Biblical word for what God requires here. Repentance is a change of heart and a change of direction. It means abandoning ways of thinking, ways of behaving, and priorities and goals that are contrary to God's standards. This is not easy. It calls for a denunciation of

human pride. It involves going completely against the culture and mind-set of the age in which we live. Look at how Isaiah describes the vast contrast between human ways and God's way (verses 8 & 9):

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord,
“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

The whole Jewish culture was oblivious to what was going on within 5 miles of the Holy City, Jerusalem, as Messiah was being born. With the exception of a peasant couple named Mary and Joseph, an old prophet and old prophetess named Simeon and Anna, some outcast shepherds, and a few foreign astrologers, no one was aware or cared that God was bringing salvation into the world in the person of His Son. Today, too, we live in a culture that is, by and large, completely ignorant and apathetic concerning the salvation that God offers. What a sad state of affairs!

Perhaps there is someone here this morning seeking more meaning to life, greater fulfillment, lasting peace. That is exactly what is waiting for those who turn to Jesus and trust Him, because the child whom the Magi sought and worshiped lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead so that we might have a right standing with God. He wants a relationship with us. The wise still seek Him, and when they do, they find Him.

i. And Micah adds, “whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” It is clear also from the prophecy that this ruler would be of ancient roots. This may refer to the fact that he is to be of the seed of David, the great king who lived 1000 years earlier, but more likely it refers to the Incarnation, the fact that the child born in Bethlehem would not be a new life generated the way other human beings are generated. Rather He would be the Son of God, who existed from all eternity, now becoming a human being in the womb of a Virgin.