

"Wise People Still Seek Him"

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Several years ago I read a funny story about the kinds of things children hear and repeat. A Sunday school teacher was teaching the Christmas story to her kindergarten class. She paused and asked, "What do we call the three Wise Men?" And one child replied, "The three maggots!" After the class stopped laughing, the teacher tried again: "What gifts did the Magi bring to Jesus?" And the same child said, "Gold, Frankensteins, and Smurfs."

Today's Scripture passage has nothing to do with green monsters or blue elves. But it does talk about the Magi – wise seekers who traveled from the East to honor the Christ child. They weren't insiders. They weren't part of the "in crowd" in Jerusalem. They were outsiders who were paying attention, and they were willing to move when God put a sign in front of them. *Listen now to the Word of God...*

MATTHEW 2:1-12 (NIV)

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 when it rose 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 Messiah 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 shepherd 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 search carefully 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 when it rose 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, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

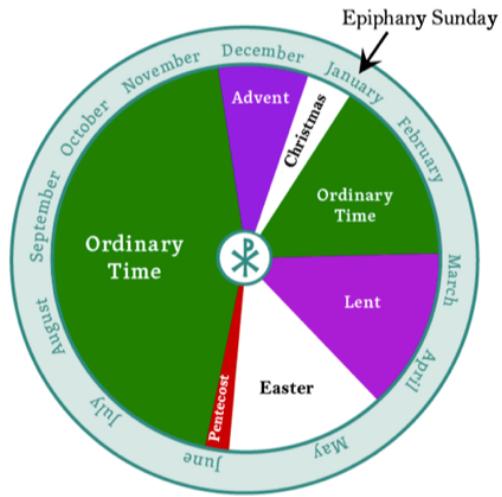
May God bless to our hearts this reading from God's Word; and to God be the glory forever. Amen.

INTRO: Here's a question we still bump into today... Are we actually paying attention to Jesus?

TikTok has become a popular place for "man on the street" interviews, where people are asked basic questions about culture, life, or what they believe. Some of it is funny. Some of it is thoughtful. And some of it reveals just how confused we've become about the most important things. I remember one interview where someone was asked, "What is the original meaning of Christmas?" And a woman answered, "Isn't that the day Jesus died?" Strange answer – but there's an unintended truth hiding in it. Because Jesus was born with a purpose, and the shadow of the cross is never very far from the manger. And maybe that confusion isn't so surprising, especially in a culture where Christmas has become louder and busier, but quieter when it comes to Jesus.

The real Christmas, of course, is about celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of humanity. Seasons like Advent and Christmas invite us to pay attention – to notice what God is doing and to pursue a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And like the journey of the Wise Men, Christmas is not just a moment; it's a process.

Today we're entering the season of Epiphany. Epiphany simply means "revealing." It's the season when the Church focuses on how God is revealed in Jesus – not just to insiders, but to the world. The church year has a rhythm to it, and Epiphany is the moment when the spotlight widens – when the story of Jesus moves from the manger into the world.



The Wise Men are an Epiphany story. They were outsiders who saw a sign, followed it, and discovered that God was closer than they expected. So where does this story meet us? In Matthew 2, we learn what it's like to experience Christmas the way God intends us to when, like the Wise Men, we do three things: (1) Follow the star of Christ, (2) Find the person of Jesus Christ, and (3) Fellowship joyfully with Christ.

1. We experience true Christmas when we FOLLOW the star of Christ.

God gave the star to the Wise Men as a sign to follow. And signs matter, because they give us direction when we're not sure where to go. A Canadian friend of mine, Steve Bell, is an award-winning Christian musician who runs a production company called Signpost Music. I once asked him why he chose that name, and he said, "*Christians are meant to be like signposts – not drawing attention to themselves, but pointing others toward Christ.*" That's exactly what the star was for the Wise Men – not the destination, but the guide that helped them find Jesus.

Now, in following the star of Christ, the Wise Men were quite bold. The star first led them into Jerusalem where they confidently strolled into town, seeking the long-awaited Messiah. Familiar with the Old Testament prophecy they asked, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (v.2). The Wise Men spoke as if this child was not to *become* king later in life – they believed he had been *born* king. It was a done deal.

Of course, King Herod (a religious Jew) and the people of Jerusalem were also familiar with these prophecies. In Herod's mind, he pictured a *political* king come to overtake his throne. And the priests and scribes of the Jewish people pictured a *spiritual* king come to overtake their religious order. So we can imagine why Herod would be "frightened, and all Jerusalem with him" (v.3) when the Wise Men were led to that place. It was risky for these outsiders to be so bold, but they were compelled by their faith. The Wise Men knew the star they followed would lead them to the promised Messiah.

The Wise Men were also patient and persistent as they followed the star of Christ. We know they traveled long distances and Matthew tells us they followed a *moving* star, guided by God. And when the Wise Men discovered the child-king was *not* in that place, they continued their journey without complaint. Verses 9-10 tell us that the star *moved ahead* of them, guiding them to the town of Bethlehem, where this time it "stopped over the place where the child was." And they walked faithfully in that direction.

So what does it look like for us to follow the light God gives today? Well, it's the gift of the Holy Spirit, the One who *illuminates* and *reveals* and *bears witness* to Christ the Messiah. As we read God's Word and spend time reaching out to others, the Holy Spirit will lead us and guide us toward Jesus. That's a promise – so be open to the movement of God in your heart.

Like the Wise Men, we experience true Christmas by following the star of Christ – by trusting the Spirit's lead. Sometimes the Spirit slows us down. Sometimes the Spirit pushes us forward. We may not always see the path clearly, but God is faithful to guide. As we hear in the popular Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV), "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*"

2. We experience true Christmas when we FIND the person of Jesus Christ.

Contemporary culture has become more and more accepting of people who say they are searching for God or some deeper purpose in life. Searching has gained new respect and is even admired. People will say, "That's wonderful for you," when they hear you're searching. But the quickest way to make someone uncomfortable is to say you've actually found God – especially if that claim involves Jesus. Yet that discomfort runs directly against Jesus' own words. Jesus said, "*Seek and you will find*" (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9). And Jesus also said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*" (John 14:6).

Searching, according to Jesus, is meant to lead somewhere. Unless we follow the light God gives, we risk stumbling in the dark – sincere, perhaps, but still lost. In verses 9 and 11, Matthew tells us that the Wise Men followed the star "*...until it stopped over the place where the child was... and on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother.*" When the Spirit leads us to Jesus, he is rarely what we expect – and often found in places we would rather avoid. It's easy to approach a newborn in a manger. It's far more difficult to follow Jesus into places of vulnerability, humility, and need.

Jesus, born poor and homeless, spent much of his life among people on the margins – people who knew their need and weren't pretending otherwise. As Jesus later said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Following the star of Christ doesn't lead us toward spiritual polish or religious comfort. It leads us toward honesty – about our own brokenness, about strained relationships that need repair, and toward people and places in our communities where grace, healing, and justice are most needed. And often, when we follow that light, we discover that Jesus has already been waiting for us there.

By following the star of Christ, we're often surprised by what we find. That's both the beauty and the mystery of Christmas. We imagine power, certainty, and clarity – and instead God comes quietly, vulnerably, wrapped in flesh. The Christ the Wise Men find is not impressive by worldly standards, but deeply present, deeply human, and full of grace.

This is where we find the person of Jesus – and in finding Jesus, we discover the Christ. We don't stumble into that discovery by accident. We discover Christ by paying attention, by following the light we're given, and by being willing to kneel when we arrive. And when we truly encounter Christ, we are not left unchanged. Repentance stops being about feeling bad or being shamed. It becomes a turning – a turning toward the life Jesus offers.

That pattern shows up again and again in Scripture. The Magi don't receive a lecture; they simply go home by another way. Jonah's hearers hear the truth and everything shifts. Fishermen leave their nets. Zacchaeus comes down from the tree. None of those moments begin with a sermon on repentance. They begin with encounter. And once people truly encounter Jesus, turning in a new direction suddenly makes sense.

3. We experience true Christmas when we FELLOWSHIP joyfully with Christ.

When the Wise Men finally found the Christ, they "*knelt down and paid him homage*" (v.11). Some versions say they "worshiped" him, though that word may not be the most precise translation. At the very least, the Wise Men knew Jesus was someone worthy of admiration and respect. It's hard to know whether they fully understood at that point that the Christ-child was God-in-the-flesh. But they knew he was unlike anyone the world had ever known. And after following the star for so long, when they finally found Jesus, Matthew tells us they were "overwhelmed with joy" (v.10) – a striking and deeply human phrase.

During the final two months of my engagement to Kris, we were separated by many hundreds of miles. I had begun my first pastoral call out of seminary at a church near Atlanta, and Kris was involved in full-time ministry at her church in New York City. To add to the challenge, we were planning a large wedding in New Orleans. So we talked or emailed almost every day – sometimes about wedding details, but mostly because we missed each other. Still, it wasn't the same as being together – in the same city, the same neighborhood, the same room.

When you're in love, absence really does make the heart grow fonder. And when we were finally reunited at the airport, the joy of seeing each other again was overwhelming. We hugged and kissed for a good two minutes before letting go. It probably looked ridiculous. I vaguely remember thinking it felt like one of those old "Big Red" gum commercials – Some of you remember: *Kiss a little longer... Hold tight a little longer... Stay close a little longer...*

I've experienced that same overwhelming joy in other moments too – like the birth of my sons, for example – moments when anticipation and longing finally gave way to presence, and everything else faded into the background. That's the kind of joy Matthew is describing when he says the Wise Men were "overwhelmed with joy." They had watched and followed the star for a long time – perhaps as long as two years. During that time they had wondered. They had hoped. And when they finally arrived, overwhelming joy was the natural response.

That same joy shows up whenever we truly come into the presence of Christ – not because everything suddenly becomes easy, but because we realize we are no longer alone. The God who once seemed distant has drawn near. The light we were following turns out to be personal. And when that realization settles in, the only fitting response is gratitude – a willingness to kneel, to open what we carry, and to offer ourselves in return.

So what do WE do when we find ourselves in the presence of the Messiah? Not just at Christmas, but throughout the year? Matthew tells us the Wise Men opened their treasure chests and offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – gifts fit for a prophet, a priest, and a king. Their joy didn't rush them away. It invited them to linger. To remain. To bask in his presence.

Conclusion – Bringing It All Together

Let's bring it all together now.... This whole journey of faith can be described pretty simply. We experience the true Christmas by following the star, finding Jesus Christ, and fellowshipping with him.

God sent the star to guide the Wise Men so they could follow it and find the Christ-child. In the same way, God gives the Holy Spirit to guide us – not just toward better religion, but toward Jesus. Jesus is our Emmanuel – God with us. And through Jesus, we are invited into an ongoing relationship – not only when we gather for worship, but every day. When we respond to that invitation, we are changed. You cannot come into the presence of the living God and remain untouched.

By fellowshipping with Christ, we experience an intimacy with God we wouldn't otherwise know. Perhaps this is what keeps some of us at a distance – because we're doing just fine, thank you very much, and we don't want things to change. But you will never experience the fullness of the true Christmas if you're not willing to fellowship joyfully with Christ. And you cannot fellowship with Christ if you're not willing to follow the light God gives, find Jesus, and respond.

So as we prepare to come to the Table this morning, it's worth asking where we are in that journey. Some of us are still following – paying attention, looking for light, not entirely sure where it will lead. Some of us are finding – discovering that Jesus is closer than we expected, already present in places we once avoided. And some of us are learning again how to fellowship – how to stay, how to receive, how to live in gratitude rather than fear.

The story of the Three Wise Men reminds us that Wise People Still Seek Jesus – by paying attention, following the light they're given, and trusting that God will meet them along the way. And here is the good news: The journey does not begin with us! Remember... The star moved first. Grace moved first. Jesus was already there before the Wise Men arrived – and Jesus is already here before we respond.

As followers of Jesus Christ, everything we do is a response to what God has already done. Faith in Christ leaves no middle ground. Christ is either everything – or nothing at all. He is not an accessory to our lives, but the sole source of meaning, salvation, and sufficiency. To trust Christ is to surrender everything to grace, holding nothing back. This is what following, finding, and fellowshipping finally lead to – not a task to perform, but grace to receive. So come to the Table – not because you have it all figured out, but because Jesus has already come near.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray: *Holy and gracious God, we thank you for meeting us on the journey... For the light you give, the grace that goes ahead of us, and the presence we discover along the way. As we continue growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, help us to keep paying attention, to follow faithfully, and to remain open to the life you offer through him. Shape our hearts with gratitude, turn us again toward your mercy, and send us out as people who reflect your light in the world. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Emmanuel. Amen.*