

SEEKING THE CHILD

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Intro – For the weeks of Advent we are looking at Christmas in Matthew. We have looked into it talking about locating the Christ child in terms of his family tree and seen that Jesus embraces the whole human family, even with its dysfunction. We have looked into it talking about accepting the Christ child. Joseph accepted the child even though he knew it wasn't his biologically. But because he accepted God, he accepted what God said and therefore the baby. Today we are going to look into the next turn of the story and seeking the Christ child. Wise men seek him and we'll learn about seeking the child from them. I'm praying that we're all here today because we, too, are seeking Jesus Christ. Let's worship together.

Sermon: Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist, was once asked what he would say to God, if it turned out there was one and Bertrand stood before him. Bertrand's answer, "God, why didn't you make yourself more obvious?" Have you wondered that? I imagine we all have.

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Philosopher Dallas Willard suggested that God's answer to Bertrand Russell would very likely have been, "Berty, I wanted to know what *you* wanted." God's great project is to have human beings who freely and maturely love him and that mean's no coercion, including hitting people over

the head with a 2x4 or appearing as cosmic Colossus¹ they cannot but accept. In romance, no one wants to be married to someone who says, "I had no choice." You don't want someone rendered physically or psychologically helpless. You want someone who in mature freedom says, "I want you." To that end, God doesn't overwhelm anyone but rather lets it be that he is sought and can be found.

Too obvious, no seeking, no freely determined desire.

That God has put seeking into life may be frustrating but before we get too frustrated, consider seeking and searching just in life. We seek cures in medicine. We seek answers in outer space. We seek solutions to problems. We seek adventure. We seek jobs. We seek treasure. We seek meaning and purpose. We seek excellence. We seek peace. We seek to become teachers, first responders, engineers. We seek character. We seek to go further, higher, deeper. We have search parties. We have search engines on the internet. We have search lights for rescues. We have search and rescue pilots. We have the search for the NW passage. We have researchers. There's a lot of seeking, searching in life ... and if you took it out, you'd have something but you'd hardly call it life devoid as it would be of quest, questing.

We are now going to visit a passage about seeking and finding. What can we learn about seeking and finding of God from it?

¹ Or I might facetiously add putting his presence down in black and white (writing) or showing up on the scene in an understandable form (a human) or doing miracles to prove his point (up to and including rising from the dead). Apart from these, he doesn't want to unfairly persuade.

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its

rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

What can we learn about seeking and finding of God from this story? One, that anyone can seek Christ. Two, that he is not found in “worldly” places. Three, that he is found through nature and the Bible. Three, that he can be actually and satisfyingly found.

Anyone can seek Christ. Because of the three gifts of gold, frankenscense, and myrhh we unconsciously assume there were three Magi. And various traditions give them various names – the more Latin tradition gives them the names Belthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. But the tradition in Africa give them the names Hor, Kardusan, and Basanater. And others count the Magi as many as twelve. But actually there is no number given in the text, nor names.

What we do know is that the Magi come a ways away and they don’t have a Bible. They have a star but they come to Jerusalem to get the scripture. Herod asks when the star appeared and then kills the male children two years and younger. So the star may have appeared two years out and

the Magi travelled from somewhere between weeks and years.

So being far away, being without a Bible, and that they are called Magi, means they aren't *Jewish*. Herod's court may have received them but probably would have also looked down on them as Gentile, pagan, heathen.

So far away means that, in terms of the literally the Temple, they are far from God, as Gentiles, far from God. But they are the first to make it to Christ's crib. They are soon joined by shepherds. This means that you may be far away, pagan, learned, with wealth or you may be near, uneducated, and poor with nothing but sheep. Yet none of these is disqualified from coming to Christ. Anyone may come.

They very may well not be named by Matthew just to make the point that any of us could write our name in for them, any of us can seek him. You don't have to have a certain education or a certain religious pedigree. Whosoever will may come.

Sometimes people talk about Christianity being exclusivistic. Hardly. Look nothing is required except seeking and bowing. Anyone may come. How about you? Don't say you're too old, too immoral, too weak, too right, too wrong, too ignorant. Anyone can come. And you may come.

He is not found in firstly in the world's "worldly" places.

In I Corinthians Paul writes that God's foolishness is wiser than the world's wisdom and has indeed upended it. This story tells just that. They seek the great ruler that was to come out of Judah and they don't find him Herculean in appearance sitting in the seat of political power with

military might at his disposal. Rather they find him what? A baby in a simple village among peasant parents and night shift shepherds. He's approachable. It fits his project to have a free and loving relationship.

It's not that you won't find Christ at Harvard but you best be ready to find him at FPC. It's not so much you won't find him Washington DC, but you best be ready to look for him someplace like Sebastian. It's not that you won't find Christ in the Miss America Pageant, but you best be ready to look for him with the Sisters of Charity in the slums of Calcutta. It's not that you won't find Christ in the First World, but you best be ready to look for him in the Third World. It's not that you won't find Christ in an ancient hymn, but will you be ready for him in "Jesus loves me this I know"?

The world's smart people, endowed people, respected people were in Jerusalem barely six miles from Bethlehem and they didn't pick up on the Christ and even when given a big clue with the Magi's arrival, they didn't pursue him. The finery of the royal courts was where they wanted to make their life's quest and in so doing, they got that ... but missed him.

The child is found through nature and the Bible. I'm going to use the word nature as mountaintop and flower but also as culture and lore. I'm glad I had Debbie read her story today because it had to do with nature. The Magi were astronomer/astrologers (put those two words together and I think that'll convey who they were).

In nature there was a star. It was believed at the time that supernovas, comets, happenings in the heavens attended the birth and death of great rulers. In 44 BC that had

happened at the funeral of Julius Caesar. Now decades later the Magi looked up and saw a new star. Scientists say that there were some unusually happenings about the time corresponding to birth of Christ, juxtapositions of Saturn and Venus or something like that. But they saw a new star and it made them wonder, "Is the new ruler here?" The star got them thinking. Nature got them thinking. Who hasn't pondered a field of bluebells, the leap of a dolphin, the birth of a baby and not thought, "Someone made this!" Nature is part of the breadcrumb trail to God.

Second, there was a legend afoot in those days in the whole Mediterranean world about a great ruler to come out of Judah. Apparently, Seutonius, Tacitus, Virgil, Josephus all refer to it. When the General Vespasian, having subdued a rebellion in Judah, ran for Caesar, part of his campaign rhetoric is that he was the ruler from Judah. Something out there in the streets, in the thoughts, in the hopes and fears, combined with the Magi's own inner searching for answers, primed them to be looking for a star. So it wasn't just zoological, or geographical, or botanical, or astronomical nature that helped them in the seeking, it was a sociological, moral, literary, legend type of nature as well.²

Something got the Magi going and it wasn't the Bible. That something got them close to Christ, to Jerusalem, but there they got the focus of the ruler being the Messiah and being from Bethlehem. The star got them to Jerusalem but it was

² A really great book about such imprints into the lore of various cultures is *Eternity in Their Hearts*. See also *Bruchko* and how a legend in an Amazon tribe primed them to receive the Gospel story.

the Bible that got them to Bethlehem. Creation gets us to the Creator, the Bible gets us to Christ.

I have eyes to see but I need my spectacles to see in focus. Nature helps me see but the Bible helps me see in focus.

I used to work with a man who when giving the story of how he became a Christian said that a coach had recommended, "Open your Bible to one of the Gospels, pray that if God is he'd show himself to you, then read and stop after five minutes. Do that all summer long." The man's testimony is that on day one, after one minute, he knew.

If you want to seek Christ, seek him through nature, yes, but then the Bible. Martin Luther said that the scriptures are the crib wherein the Christ child lies. Do you want God? His clues are here – around us and in this Word.

He can actually be found. Nothing discourages a trip more than having no hope with respect to it. Is there a parent alive who's child has said something like, "Why show up for the game? We're only going to lose!"? But this story tells us that God is not like that; the Magi actually found what they were looking for.

Sometimes people like looking but never finding, to be always questioning but never finding answers. An answer would mean a truth, a conclusion. No longer could you parade as an open-minded person. Don't be so open minded your brains fall out. Open your mouth for food but if you leave it open, the food falls out. Open but then chomp down on something solid. Don't be open mouthed but never chomping, never swallowing.

These wise men didn't go here and there and then end up back home saying, "Well, we tried at least." Or, "The joy was in the journey." Look! The joy was not in the journey, it was in the finding, in reaching what they set out for. The joy is not in being hungry for steak, it's in being given a steak!

The Magi had a longing that set them on a journey and they reached their journey's end at the crib of the Christ. He wasn't a force that propelled them to the ground but a baby they could approach and bend the knee to. Part of the reason some people are always seeking and never finding is because it comes down to bending the knee, to admitting there is a Christ, that there is a Lord, that not all religions are the same, that there are answers, that there is a way.

And when the Magi bent that knee to that baby, it wasn't to an algorithm for success, or a concept to adhere to, or a book to study, or a formula to follow but a person to meet, a person to relate to, a king to be blessed by.

We come not to the perks of the person. In other words it is not, "I want your power and your riches and your help but you?" Some people aren't finding him because they're looking for his perks but not him.

We come not to the person we want. In other words, "You be the way I want you to." Lots of people believe in God, who's like a giant Pillsbury doughboy. But do those same people believe in the God of the Bible? Don't you see? We come to a person ... to a relationship, to a person who is who the Bible says he is, not who you or I just want him to be.

Chapter two begins talking about King Herod this, and King Herod that. Once Bethlehem and the Messiah is cited, once the Magi find the child, Herod is nevermore in this story referred to as King Herod; he's just Herod. There in that little town as those men bent the knee, a coronation took place. They found the true king and crowned him in their hearts. And the text says they went home a different way. Yes, the road home was completely different, they were completely different because they sought *and they found*.

The Bible says to each of us today, Seek and you will find. Will you seek the child?

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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