

Matt. 2: 1-12

Jan. 6, 2019 Epiphany

WHERE IS THE SAVIOR?

The Magi: from Disappointment to True Treasure

The Magi, or wise men, were real people, with real feelings, desires, needs, and yearnings. The Bible story doesn't tell us everything about them. Were there only three? Or were there more? Tradition has settled on three because of the three gifts they presented: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But there could have been more.

It says, "... wise men from the East came to Jerusalem..." Likely they had traveled a long way, maybe from as far away as Babylon. They came asking one of the most important questions anyone of us can ask: Where is this savior?

Recognizing the Signs

These ancient astronomers (who were probably also astrologers) had observed something unusual in the night sky and they felt compelled to follow the large star. They concluded it was a sign that a Jewish king had been born. It shouldn't surprise us that wise men in, say Babylon, should pay attention to signs for a Jewish king. Don't forget the Babylon Jerusalem connection: 500 years earlier a large contingent of Jewish leaders and scholars had been led as captives to Babylon. Later they returned to Jerusalem and their homeland, but they left behind a colony of Jews and body of learning whose influence spread among the Babylonians and then the Persians. It would not be unusual for Babylonian scholars to know Jewish history and biblical prophecies and some might even have converted to the Jewish faith. So putting it all together some wise men concluded that the heavens were telling them something special was happening among the Jews and they set out to see it for themselves.

Meanwhile King Herod – who had gotten himself appointed "king of the Jews" by the Roman Senate – occupied the royal palace in Jerusalem. I wonder if he looked at the night sky and saw anything unusual. Did King Herod notice what the Magi saw? I doubt it. I wonder how many times I've missed signs from God? How about you?

The Magi presumed that this newborn king of the Jews would be found in the royal palace in Jerusalem; so that's where they headed. Their assumptions led them there, not the star. At the palace they didn't find what they were looking for, but disappointment instead.

How many of us chase a star, hoping to find whatever it is we believe we need to find: a career, a goal, an achievement, a dream, or a person? Life is defined by our pursuits, isn't it? That star the Magi followed held incredible significance for them, but others didn't see much in the sky. We chase our dreams, seeing possibilities where others do not. We chase our dreams because at a deep level we hope to satisfy that restless feeling that something's missing. Christians recognize the inner longing and striving, the yearning for meaning and happiness. as a hunger for connection with our Creator. Who doesn't experience an intense need for love and intimacy and belonging? It's an infinite longing that can only be filled by the infinite God.

People chase after their stars hoping to retrieve what they most want: a home in which to belong, relationships that heal loneliness, assurance that good wins over evil, success that is fulfilling, and something meaningful to live for that leaves a legacy.¹

A Long Journey

How far did the Magi travel? The Bible doesn't say, but there is a clue (see Matt. 2:16) that it could have been a two-year journey. By the way, have you noticed how the road from dream to reality is mostly long and marked by challenges, failures, and discouragement? Maybe not, now that we are living in the age of instant gratification – "if I can't get it right now it's not worth the effort."

¹Rob Burkhardt, "Where Is The Child?" *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery* (United Methodist Pub. House, Nashville, TN, 2015)

Nonetheless, I'm saying true treasure can take years, maybe a lifetime to find. The journey isn't measured in miles but in the transformation of our own lives.²

After a long journey the Magi thought they'd made it – only thing left was to worship the child. They thought their goal and destination went together, but the child was not in Jerusalem, at the palace. Maybe you've been there yourself and know how they must have felt. You finally get what you want, but after the initial happiness or pride, there is no lasting peace or satisfaction. That restless hunger for meaning returns and you start looking for something else to fill it.

Some people get stuck on what they have or have lost. They give up the quest. Some people self-medicate: anything to dull the pain of emptiness or fear. Many jump from one activity to the next, a hobby, a person, a pleasure, endlessly trying to fill the void. But the magi didn't give up their quest. They found another way. We can too.

Finding Another Way

They could have stayed in Jerusalem, I suppose, pretending everything was okay. They could have just gone home and spent the rest of their lives bemoaning their mistake and lamenting what might have been. Confronted with disappointment at not finding the child at the palace they set off in a new direction. Rather than trusting their assumptions, they took the advice that theologians and scholars had given to Herod: the Scriptures say that Bethlehem – a little podunk village a few miles away – is the place from which “... will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” Micah 5:2. Following this new path the magi found what they were looking for. Their journey wasn't just from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, it was from painful disappointment to joy and amazement. This is a journey we can all take and at last find the Savior who can fill our soul's longing for meaning, purpose, and belonging. How do I find this Savior – the One who can be the star I chase after, who can fulfill my longings for meaning, purpose, and belonging? The magi's story offers some advice for our journeys.

1. Chart a New Course: The magi's goal of finding the newborn king of the Jews wasn't misguided. They just got the wrong destination at first. Satisfying our deepest longings is hardwired in our souls by our Creator. But we seek satisfaction in all the wrong places and persons. Like the magi we need a course correction and to first admit we're in the wrong place. The baby wasn't in Jerusalem and no matter how long they waited, how much more money they spent, that wasn't going to change. How much have you invested in a dead-end quest to find meaning in your life?

2. Seek Greater Wisdom: The magi set aside their own calculations, conclusions, and assumptions and sought directions from an ancient text to an unlikely place. Jesus was born in fulfillment of a prophecy made 700 years earlier. God had told the people of Israel 700 years before exactly where Christ would be born. Maybe you need to set aside your assumptions and consult Scripture again for directions on how to live.

3. Ask People Who Know: Even Herod consulted those who knew more than he. “*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.*” You'll never find what you seek by following those who don't know the way. In a media and celebrity saturated culture how can we find truly wise people? Maybe look in unlikely places? The history of the Christian church is filled with beautiful testimonies from people who have gained wisdom from a lifetime as faithful disciples of Jesus. St. Augustine, St. Francis, Thomas a Kempis, Brother Lawrence, Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux, Julian of Norwich, are but a few suggestions. Read John Bunyan, C. S. Lewis and others like them. If you're not a reader make the effort to find them on recordings. Be in a small group at church where you can ask questions ... maybe someone's asked it before. Discover wise people in your church or neighborhood and make time to be with them. Wise saints live quietly and peaceably all around us.

4. Follow God's Lead: The magi “... 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.” The same star that had

² Ibid

prompted their quest led them to their heart's desire. Keep your eye on God's star. God is leading. You can't go wrong by attentively meditating on Scripture in that relentless search for meaning, belonging, and contentment. God put eternity in your heart, you'll only find it by following the One who created your longing.

5. Look In The Right Place: The magi looked in the palace for the new king. He wasn't there. All our efforts to find our souls rest will come to naught if we look in all the wrong places. We look at how Jesus lived and marvel at His courage, but then look at our world and see that things don't work that way. That's why so many don't take His path.

Look, there is nothing wrong with hard work, success, and enjoying life's pleasures. They are God's good gifts to His children. Nevertheless, to spend your life in pursuit of just pleasure, or fame, or fortune is a chasing after the wind. Trying to meet your spiritual and eternal longings through material and temporal means is like trying to drink from an empty cup. Herod fell into that trap – he believed life was all about him and his ambitions and it brought only misery and grief to the people of Bethlehem. Peace in our souls is found when we rest in our Maker, in a selfless relationship with God, in surrender to divine control. *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,”* Matt. 6:33.

6. Stay the Course: If the magi hadn't continued their quest in spite of disappointment at the palace doors, we wouldn't be celebrating Epiphany today. They'd be long forgotten to history. It's easy to lose your way when the struggles and disappointments of life assail you. One of my favorite Bible verses has kept me going through all kinds of troubles. Galatians 6:9, *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”* Persistence in the wrong direction is foolishness. Perseverance in the soul's quest for the one Savior who can bring us life and peace, is wisdom. Every great accomplishment was bought with perseverance, while failures can be the next step on the road of success. How do we know when to press on or to hold tight?

a. Don't overlook real gold when you find it. The magi recognized the Savior even though He was not as they expected. True treasure doesn't always look like treasure. The truest and most enduring treasure is often closer than we think. For example: a lot of people don't take Jesus seriously, (I mean seriously enough to actually make Him and His church a priority in life), because they don't like the company He keeps, like the many flawed and hypocritical people in His church. Or maybe they hear Jesus' words: *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”* John 14:6 and they think that's just too exclusive and intolerant.

But dismissing the Savior because of the failures of His followers is a tragic mistake. It's like dismissing a battered and dirty wooden chest without opening it to find incalculable treasure. Those Christians can look as decrepit as a dying world except for one thing: they've found lasting treasure in the truth of Jesus. He *is* the way the truth and the life. Check it out for yourself.

b. Value the treasure when you find Him. The magi gave very expensive gifts to the Savior, after a long and expensive journey. Then they bowed down and worshiped him. Have you invested much of value in God's kingdom? Your time, your money (which represents our time and labor), your talent, your worship are valuable treasures you can invest in His kingdom. When you care for God's creation and care for people, seeking to emulate Jesus himself, you are investing in God's kingdom. In the end these investments make you richer.

The Greatest Quest

The greatest quest in life is seeking the Savior who can fill the longings of your soul. Actually, He is the One who can heal your sin-sick soul and fill you with peace, belonging, and a fulfilling purpose. Then you will know what true treasure is.... Seek Him until He finds you.

***“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together,”* Colossians 1:17.**