

“Find”

*Epiphany 2019*

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas and New Year’s really flew by this year, didn’t they? I really appreciate all of those who make this church and community such a great place, allowing me to spend some time away with my family. Chuck and Connie led the worship service last week, and many of you were involved in the Christmas Candlelight services. Even if you didn’t serve in leadership in the church, many of you just did what you always do: you were the hands and feet of Jesus to friends, neighbors and strangers during this important holiday season.

Turn to your neighbor and simply tell them, “We are here to worship Jesus together.” That is why we have come. Would you please join me in prayer?

Awesome and mighty God, thank you for your love, shown to us once again in the gifts of Christmas and a fresh New Year. May your words be a light to our path as we again open the scripture and hear your voice speaking to us. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

We just finished the Advent season, the traditional start of the Christian Year, and a powerful reminder that even as we celebrated Jesus’ coming at Christmas, we still expect him to return again to this earth. Throughout the last six weeks, we read prophecies and Christmas stories. We met characters in the Christmas story, including Zachariah, Elizabeth and John; Joseph, Mary and Jesus; the shepherds, Gabriel and the rest of the angels. We have sung together, celebrated together, and lit candles together.

So tell me, if you please, what characters in the Christmas story have we not mentioned yet? (Check out the nativity set behind me.) That’s right, the

three wise men. I know you all were listening carefully to our scripture reading just a moment ago, so let's take a short quiz.

Question 1: Who saw "the star in the east"?

- a) Shepherds, b) Mary and Joseph, c) Three kings, d) Both a and c
- e) None of the above, f) Lions, tigers, and bears, oh, my!

Question 2: What does "wise men" (magi) refer to?

- a) Men of the educated class, b) Eastern kings, c) Astrologers,
- d) Sages, e) Men smart enough to follow the star

Question 3: How many wise men came to see Jesus? a) at least two, b) three,

- c) a dozen, d) none of the above

Question 4: The wise men stopped in Jerusalem to...

- a) Inform Herod about Jesus, b) Find out where Jesus was,
- c) Ask about the star that they saw, d) Fill up with gas, e) Buy presents for Jesus

Question 5: The wise men found Jesus in a...

- a) Manger, b) Stable, c) House, d) Holiday Inn Express, e) Good mood

Question 6: What is frankincense?

- a) A precious metal, b) A precious fabric, c) A precious perfume,
- d) An Eastern monster story, e) None of the above

Question 7: What is myrrh?

- a) An easily-shaped metal, b) A spice used for burying people, c) A drink
- d) After-shave lotion, e) None of the above

Question 8: I think that this quiz was...

- a) Super, b) Great, c) Fantastic, d) All of the above

So, how did you do? I've given this test before, and it never fails that someone complains, "But that's not what they told us at the Walk to Bethlehem!"

True. I find it so ironic that our traditions do not always reflect the Bible accurately. And I will confess, I chose the final hymn today, "We Three Kings," which is probably the most biblically inaccurate carol in our hymnal, but I love it, anyway.

I have some catholic friends over in Germany who do a better job of sticking to the script. They make their magi travel through the house before they get to be in the nativity. Seriously. My friend Marc puts them out in Advent, and they go from room to room, "searching" for Jesus, and they finally make it there in January at Epiphany. I've never asked him why he doesn't make them travel for two years...probably because his kids might break them.

The point of this quiz was not to make us all feel bad or tell us that we need to change our nativity set. The point is to wonder: Who were these magi, and what were they waiting for? Is this just a story to explain why we exchange gifts on Christmas? Is that all?

Well, let's do a little detective work. Open up to Matthew 2 with me. The first thing the scripture says is these magi came from the East, but it doesn't say what country. Most people assume it was Arabia or Persia, which are both east of Israel. We don't really know. But the point is, these magi were not kings, and they were definitely not Jewish. The original readers of this gospel would have realized that these people were foreigners, possibly pagans.

If they weren't Jewish, why were they looking for the "King of the Jews"? The answer very well could lie in the book of Daniel, the Old Testament "lion's den" guy. Remember him? He and his friends were taken from royal Jewish families and made to be slaves in Babylon, which just happens to be right in the heart of Persia. And guess what Daniel's job was? He was a wise man. Someone

who could interpret dreams and signs. A seer. An astrologer, or even...wait for it...a magi. It is very possible that because of Daniel's influence 600 years earlier, these wise men came out of the east looking for the Christ child!

These magi looked to the heavens and saw a star-lit billboard that read, “There is a new king in town!” and so they went to Jerusalem to find him. Why Jerusalem? It was the capital of Israel. If you want to see the Queen of England, where would you go? London, probably to Buckingham Palace. Similarly, Jerusalem was Israel's center of government and religion. Specifically, Herod's palace and the temple were, respectively, the most likely locations of the Jewish king. So the wise men went there first.

At the palace, they found a king, all right, but not the one they were looking for. They met King Herod, a poser, someone who really was just a puppet of the Roman government. Herod wasn't even Jewish himself! But he was a powerful, paranoid and murderous old man. The scripture says he was “disturbed” by the presence of these wise men; some bibles use the word “frightened”. Herod was terrified at the mere hint of competition for his throne.

There is a distinct irony in Matthew's story. Herod, the scribes and the priests all knew the king would be born in Bethlehem, but they all stayed home. Only the wise men went looking for the new king. Isn't that strange? The Jewish leaders interpreted the scripture, but failed to take action. Herod the current king was freaked out and wanted to kill Jesus, but he stayed inside his palace. In the end, it was only the foreign magi who sought out the Christ.

At this point, you might be asking yourself, “So what? What does all of this have to do with me?” Here's what I think: we all need to be searching for Christ. Take these wise men: they were not even Jews. They were from the “wrong”

country, the "wrong" religion, the "wrong" background; for heaven's sake, they even went to the wrong city! But these were the men desperately searching for Jesus. The scripture says that they knew Jesus had been "born a king." Not born a prince. Not "eventually, one day, when the time is right, he'll be a king", either by succession or by some military coup. Jesus was divinely ordained to be king from the moment he came to earth. The wise men knew that.

Do you know that? Do you know that Jesus is King for All? This search for Jesus is not limited to the people with the right credentials. All people can worship Jesus! You simply have to have a heart that is ready to receive him. You have to be desperate enough to search diligently, maybe for years, to find him. Look, the story says they found the "child in a house," not a "baby in a manger." If you read later on, Herod kills all infants two years and younger. These wise men travelled two years to find Christ! Are you that desperate to find Christ?

Maybe before you can answer that, we have to define what they were looking for. Let's follow the story along further. The wise men did eventually find Jesus at home with his mother Mary. Don't ask me where Joseph was; the scripture doesn't say. Either he was home but fixing the toilet, or he was out buying diapers. That's where I would have been, anyway. The magi entered the home and worshiped Jesus on the spot. And they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These gifts are funny. A Washington Times article a while back quipped, "if the three wise men had been women, they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned up the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts, and there would be peace on earth."

Well, sadly, Mary did not receive any such help. But the wise men, now at the end of their desperate search, gave their gifts to the Christ child. Gold – because he was a king. Frankincense, an offering normally burned in the temple – because Jesus was God. Myrrh, an embalming oil or spice, used at a burial – because Jesus was the Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

Can I just ask you this morning, how desperately are you searching for Christ, and what are you willing to give him? These wise men, these magi or astrologers, they went to great length and personal risk to find Jesus. They were looking for the one to worship, to give their lives to, and they were not holding anything back. Not their money, not their time, not their traditions or background or culture or even their nationality.

I am convinced there are some who think Jesus is not the king for all. He is just a king for some. They think, “If you fit the right mold, if you have the right training and background, it’s OK for you to worship Jesus. But if you don’t, well that’s just too bad.” Matthew 2 tells us emphatically, NO! Jesus is a king for everyone. If these men found answers by finding and knowing Jesus, anyone can.

So the question remains, what about you? Are you searching for Jesus? Do you need to give him your gold, frankincense, or myrrh? Is there something precious you are withholding from him? Do you need to submit to Christ as our King, worship him as your God, and confess your belief that he died to save you? Jesus is the King for All, and he can be your king, too.

Maybe you have sought him, and still are seeking him. That’s great. Who else is following in your footsteps? If you think about it, we have a lot to thank Daniel for in this story. His faith led these magi to travel in search of Christ. Daniel helped us know we would find our King, our God, our Redeemer in a small

house in Bethlehem 600 years later. And it leaves me wondering, what am I willing to do to find the King of Kings and lead someone else to him? Today is the first Sunday of the year. Christmas may be 352 days away, but it's never too late to find Jesus. And I pray that you will, and that you will lead others to him, as well. Happy New Year!

MEMORY VERSE:

Isaiah 60:3

"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you see Jesus as a "King for All" or just a "King for Some"?
2. Which of the three gifts – gold (ruler), incense (deity), myrrh (sacrifice) – do you identify with?
3. How far would you go to see the King of Kings?
4. How does your life help lead others to Jesus?