

In Pursuit Of The King Part 1

We begin our Advent series this morning. Just a reminder as to why we celebrate Advent. The word Advent is from the Latin word which means arrival. In the church we are talking about our anticipation of the arrival of Jesus as a baby, born in Bethlehem. Specifically, we're talking about the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. My entire pastorate here we have taken time to focus on the mystery of the incarnation during this season of the year. A few years ago I shared with you my concern that Christmas had become so secularized that Jesus had been lost. Let Christmas be the secular holiday with the tree and Santa. Enjoy the songs of the season and all but let the church celebrate Advent as we prepare our hearts and fix our attention on what is truly important, that God became man and dwelt among us in the birth of Jesus! Don't miss the importance of this season of Advent. A few years back we began lighting the Advent candles to reinforce the significance of Jesus, the light that shined into the darkness of this world.

I've called this series In Pursuit of the King. This morning we are going to focus on an odd, unexpected group of people that were looking for Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, Savior and King. Why is that important to us? Because like most of us, these men were not Jewish. They were not at all the people you would expect to be in pursuit of a Jewish King. Their story lets us know that God's redemption and salvation has always been for the whole world.

The truth is God has always been available to God seekers and strangely enough, sadly enough, it has often been Jews and then Christians, followers of the One God, who have tried to put up walls and barrier to limit access. "Those people." "What are those people doing here? They aren't Jews, they're Romans, Gentiles, Pagans, so what are they doing, looking for God?" "What are those people doing here? I don't think they are followers of Jesus. They aren't like us, they aren't Pentecostal or Evangelical." "What are they after? What do you suppose they want? What are they looking for? They don't seem like 'our kind'." Sound familiar? Think of the way the disciples approached Samaritans and the scandal of Jesus' story of the "Good Samaritan." They had never thought of a "good" Samaritan. In John 4 they couldn't believe Jesus went through Samaria and were even further shocked when Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman! The disciples tried to keep the little children away from Jesus. They looked down on and tried to exclude the pagans, the Roman collaborators like Zacchaeus, a Jew who collected taxes for the Romans. It was after telling Zacchaeus he was coming home with him and seeing a transformation in Zacchaeus' life, Jesus said, "**Today, salvation has come to this house...For**

the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Luke 19:9-10. Jesus came to save the lost and to restore all of us to God. The birth of Jesus is about his coming to pursue Zacchaeus and to pursue us. He came to seek and to save us. But Matthew 2 tells about some people that came seeking Jesus.

“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.’” Matthew 2:1-2

Who were these guys? What do we know about the Magi? Actually, not much. The Magi are the wise men of the nativity scene, the three well-dressed guys. They are sometimes referred to as three kings. Actually what we know is based on legend. Matthew doesn't tell us there were three guys, just that there were Magi that came from the East. We assume they are from Persia (Iran). Persia had been a “periodic oppressor” of Israel. Scott Hahn wrote, “If there was no love lost between Israel and Persia during the reign of King Herod, it's because there was so little love to lose.” Jews and Romans agreed on one thing – they both hated the Persians and that included the Magi.

Tradition says there were three of them, perhaps simply because three gifts were mentioned. They were educated men, assumed to be astrologers that studied the stars believing answers could be found there. Some suggest they were practitioners of Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion practiced in Persia. They believed in one God rather than multiple gods, believed in a heaven and hell, good and evil, but apparently these magi were aware there was something missing in their life, something that motivated them to go in pursuit of a new king. I couldn't help but wonder about these Magi, these wise men. What was it that caused them to leave family and friends and their home and their culture and make this extraordinary journey from Persia, crossing deserts and encountering hardships of all kinds, to look for a baby? The bible says **“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” Ecclesiastes 3:11** I believe God set a hunger, a desire to know him in the hearts of these men, in the hearts of all men and women – eternity in their hearts. Wise men and women know enough to know there must be a God, there must be a designer of all that is. This universe didn't come about by random chance. Creation points to God. Paul writes, **“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly**

seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Romans 1:20 These Magi knew from creation, from what they saw, that there was a God of power and design. They were God seekers. They wanted to find him, to know and understand him. They were men of science, students of all things, but they were wise enough to recognize their knowledge was not enough. They were good, decent men, believing in good and renouncing evil, but they were wise enough to realize they weren't good enough. They were wise enough to know they needed to seek the Lord and come to know him!

But how would they find him? As we said, some assume they were astrologers and had studied the stars and that's what revealed to them that a king was to be born. People have tried to match up the appearance of a comet or some planetary movement that could have resulted in them being able to follow a star all the way to Bethlehem. There are a couple of problems with that. One, we don't believe the alignment of stars can in anyway predict or foretell the birth of kings or anyone else. The alignment of stars don't determine events or actions of men. Second, this star didn't act like any other star. This wasn't a planet or a comet. The bible says, **“...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...”** **Matthew 2:9-11** This was one amazing star. It seemed to appear and disappear. It moved ahead of them, leading them and then it came to rest right on top of the house where Jesus was. St. John Chrysostom observed that this star burned bright at midday “and this is not within the power of a star, nor even of the moon. This star, was not of the common sort, or rather not a star at all, it seems to me, but some invisible power transformed into this appearance.” Some suggested it was actually an angel, or perhaps simply the glory of God that led them to the house and to Jesus, like the pillar of cloud in the Old Testament. Whatever it was, it suggests to me that God was drawing these magi to himself. If they were God seekers, then he was seeking them. James says **“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”** **James 4:8** If you seek him, you will find him because he is seeking you. He will use whatever means necessary to call to you, to reveal himself to you, to speak in a way you can hear and understand. A favorite quote from John Neuhaus, **“Disguise is central to God's way of dealing with us human beings. Not because God is playing games with us but because the God who is beyond our knowing makes himself known in the disguise of what we can know. The Christian word for this is**

revelation and the ultimate revelation came by incarnation...God is a master of disguises, in order that we might see... Christmas is about incarnation and incarnation is God's becoming what he is not in order that we might become what he is. Thus does God reveal himself.” Richard John Neuhaus

God used a star to capture the attention of these magi and to lead these God seekers to himself. The point is, God is still seeking, still drawing people to himself. Are you wise enough to notice? He is seeking you? Are you seeking and pursuing the king? He isn't hiding from you. He wants to be found by you because he has come to seek and save the lost. Even pagan outsiders like the magi, even people like you and me, he wants to be found by you! Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord says, **“You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.” Jeremiah 29:13** Young, old, black, white, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, legal or illegal, lost or found, gay or straight, sinner or saint, Democrat or Republican, if you will seek the Lord he will show himself to you. He wants you to find him and find hope and salvation and life and peace and forgiveness. He is waiting for you.

Notice who wasn't pursuing the king! **“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.’” Matthew 2:1-6**

King Herod was a vicious ruler, so paranoid he had anyone he considered a threat to his throne killed, including three sons and a wife or two. The only reason he would be looking for the newborn king and Messiah would be to kill him which is what he tried to do in ordering all boys two years of age and under in Bethlehem and its vicinity to be killed. But the chief priests and teachers of the law? They should have been watching for and anticipating the birth of the Messiah. They knew what the bible said concerning the birth place of the Messiah. They knew it would be Bethlehem. Why didn't they go with the Magi? Herod secretly told the Magi to go

search for the baby and report back to him (v7-8), but the Magi had already asked throughout Jerusalem where the one born King of the Jews was. They expected to find him in a Palace since he was a future king, or perhaps in the temple since he was more than a king but Messiah, deliverer and Savior, Redeemer. Word was out, so why weren't the Chief Priests and the Scribes searching Bethlehem with the Magi? **They had knowledge, they knew what the Bible said, but knowledge isn't enough. Decision is required. Response is demanded.** You have to decide whether you will pursue the king or not! You have to decide to receive him into your heart and life as Savior and Lord, to make him your own. It was John who declared concerning Jesus, **"He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."** John 1:10-12

The people in Jerusalem didn't recognize him. The people in Bethlehem, the innkeeper and others were indifferent, they didn't care, they didn't notice. In case you haven't noticed, you are in the minority of people who bothered to go to church this morning to acknowledge and worship Jesus, the Savior, Messiah, the King of Kings. For most people he just isn't on their radar screen. They just don't really care.

Some are like Herod, openly antagonistic, angry, opposed to God, to Jesus and his followers. Many are like the Chief Priests and teachers of the law. They have knowledge but they just haven't decided to seek him or to serve him. They haven't come to the conclusion that pursuing Jesus the King is worth the trouble, the effort, the sacrifice or whatever might be required.

You'll have to decide. If Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Redeemer, the One who is the way, the truth and the life; if salvation and eternal life are found only in him and through faith in him, then I think he is worth the sacrifice, whatever it might be. Let that pursuit of the King, that hunger and desire to know Jesus and to have a new life in Christ, let that pursuit move you to decision and action today.

Think about it, that hunger to pursue knowing the King prompted these pagan Magi to travel hundreds of miles over many months to find him. This wasn't a hobby, a casual commitment, this was a life-long, life-changing journey and decision for them. Nothing would

be the same for the Magi after this. They left everything in order to find Jesus while the Chief Priests wouldn't even travel five miles to Bethlehem. You have to decide. Jesus is born. The Savior of the world has come. The bible says his name would be called Immanuel which means God with us. He has come to seek and to save the lost. He has come to meet you, to save you. Are you willing to come seeking him today? Are you willing to leave your old life behind and come in pursuit of the King? He is waiting for you. It's decision time!

Finally, look what happens when they find 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.” Matthew 2:9-12**

They found him! They went in pursuit of a king and they found him. But it wasn't just a matter of intellectual curiosity or scientific inquiry, they found him because they were God seekers and when they saw him they did the only appropriate thing: they bowed down and worshiped him. This wasn't just honor for a future king, this was acknowledgement of a Divine Savior. They worshiped him, bowed before him and presented the gifts they brought with them.

They found him! God seekers are rewarded with God himself. “Seek me and you will find me.” Seek him and when you find him, you'll never be the same. The wise men were changed by their encounter. The bible says having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned by a different route. They not only went home a different way, they went home different people! They weren't the same because they had met a living Savior. They had met Jesus.

This hasn't been a great sermon, but I felt I had an assignment to point you to the King; to tell someone if you will seek him you will find him. He isn't hiding from you, he is right there, reaching out to you if you will just open your eyes and respond to him, surrender to him. Call on him. You have to respond. You have to take action. The chief priests and teachers of the law missed it. They wouldn't respond to the knowledge they had. Herod missed it, but the Wise men and the shepherds and all those who came looking for him found him and were changed by

him. They left rejoicing. They came seeking and they went back telling others of what they had found.

It's time for you to meet the Savior. Come in pursuit of the king and you'll find life! If you feel like you don't know where to look, try looking the same place the Chief Priests looked to find the answer to Herod's question. Look in the Bible, the word of God. You'll find Jesus and his promise of salvation and eternal life there. "Well, I don't know. I just feel like I need a sign of some kind." That's what Christmas is all about. **"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call his name Immanuel: God with us." Isaiah 7:14** You've got the sign you need. Come find Jesus to be more than a baby in a manger – find him to be Savior and Lord of your life. Come to Jesus. If you do, like the wisemen, you'll go home a different way. You'll never be the same!