

SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND

Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 2:1-12

“Then when you call upon me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.”

Jeremiah 29:12-13

A New Year’s sermon preached by Rev. David Handley
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

As we enter into this new year 2012, it is timely that we look at our personal faith in the context of our life’s priorities. One can set all kinds of good “new years resolutions,” but what will be happening in this most crucial of all areas of your life--your personal faith? How will your awareness of God in your life be expanding? How will your eyes be opened in new ways to Christ’s presence by your side—informing your thinking, shaping your attitudes, giving you courage and wisdom as you deal with the relationships and the circumstances in which you find yourselves daily.

In reflecting on these things this week, I stumbled upon a phrase from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians that said, far better than I ever could, what my hopes and dreams are for you and for this remarkable congregation. Here is how the Apostle Paul puts it: *“I want you to know how much I am struggling for you: I want your hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that you may know Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”* (Colossians 2:1-3)”

So this, above all, is the “great treasure”: to know Christ, *“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”* I want you to join me in seeking with all of your heart--the treasure of knowing Christ in your life each day!

Now, to the Wise Men: they show us how to “seek and find,” like stepping stones as we move toward new discoveries for our faith. First, they sought EXPECTANTLY. These “Magi” were not Jews, they were people of another faith, another culture. They were probably Zoroastrians from what we now call Iran, “the land between two rivers.” They didn’t even know that it was Christ they were seeking, because they did not have any tradition of a Messiah coming to save the world. But the beauty of this story is that God spoke to them in a language they could understand! Yes, “God so loved *the world*,” that God speaks to each in a language we can understand. The language of astrology was even forbidden in the Hebrew scriptures,

horoscopes and the like. Biblical faith does not lead us to put our trust in such. But the beauty of this story is that God meets us where we are. And these “Magi,” each night, would record the movements of the stars, they looked EXPECTANTLY for what God may be telling them.

As the world shrinks and diversity grows in our own land, let us pause for a moment to reflect on what a hopeful message this is, that “God so loved *the world*...” (John 3:16). Does it not expand our view of the wonder and grace of God to think that, just as God planted the prophets and their prophecies in the expectation of the Jews, so God surely found other ways to prepare the Gentiles to seek Christ. So it was with the Magi and their religion. And does this not change the way we think of sharing our faith in Christ with people of other faiths? Perhaps if we began with a base line of respect, and did more listening than talking, we would find “pointers” to Jesus we could explore with them. Sharing our faith with people of different faiths, then, can take more the form of *dialog* than preaching. As Becky Pippert puts it so well, “We seek to *expose* our faith to others, not *impose* our upon them.”¹

Now, what about your own life? What are you seeking? What is your life caught up in? What gets your energies going? What do you look forward to for your happiness? -- Good health? Good family? Prosperity? Business success? Investment savvy? Romance? A great body, or the right suit of clothes? Success at school? These are all things that drive us. But I think we see how fragile, how short-lived they are. Still, in these things that you seek, could God be speaking to you, just as God spoke to the Wise Men in their star-gazing, “There must be something more.”

Sir Edmund Hillary was the New Zealander who, in 1953, led the first known expedition successfully to the summit of Mt. Everest, along with his team of Nepalese climbers. When he and the team descended to the base camp, there were journalists and photographers from all over the world there to greet them. One called out, “Sir Edmund, when you reached the summit at last, what did you do?” The 33-year-old explorer responded, “We sat down, we ate our sandwiches and drank our coffee, . . . and we realized that there was nothing left to conquer.”

Could it be, in your strivings, be they successful or not, there is a star rising? All you have to do to find out is to take the next step.

The Wise Men didn’t have much to go on. Paul Maier, professor emeritus of History at Western Michigan University, wrote a book *The First Christmas*.² He identifies that there was, around this time, an unusual convergence of Saturn and Jupiter. In the Zoroastrian holy book, according to Maier, Saturn was identified as “the Lord and Protector of Palestine;” Jupiter was “the King’s planet.” So it would not stretch the imagination too much for those who paid

¹ Rebecca Manley Pippert *Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (InterVarsity Press, 1979); see also the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17:16-34.

² Paul Maier, *The First Christmas* (Kregel Publishers, 1991).

attention to the stars to conclude that there was a new and important King born in Palestine, and head west to give him honor. That was their “next step.” They took it because they were *expectant*. So this year, could you be *expectant* in your search to hear God speaking to you in a new way?

Secondly, the Wise Men sought *scripturally*. Now, let’s be clear: these Magi did not have the scriptures, they did not know the scriptures, they were not searching the scriptures. But once they took that next step and ended up in the King’s Palace in Jerusalem, they needed more specific guidance. They ended up in the logical place, where kings would be born; but their search needed to be fine-tuned. Their GPS needed to re-calibrate. And, of all people, God used the ruthless, godless ruler Herod to introduce them to the holy scriptures.

Can you picture that scene, in Herod’s palace? The king called together the chief priests and teachers of the Law. “Where is Messiah to be born,” he asked. Rembrandt could have done wonders with this scene: In a candle lit room old sages from the East, eyes wide with wonder, bend over ancient scrolls as they are unrolled by the sages of Jerusalem. The candlelight accents wrinkles across the faces. “The new king is not here?,” the Magi asked naively, as Herod face grows dark with fear. “No,” said the scribes, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for see what the prophet said?” The scribe points with his silver stylus, moving from right to left on the prophet Micah’s words:

You, Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the tribes, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel...His origins are from of old, from ancient of days!’” (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6).

“Bethlehem?!,” the Wise Men look disappointed. “Where is this ‘Bethlehem’?” Not far off, they are told, just a Sabbath day’s journey south. So re-directed by the scriptures, they went on their way *“rejoicing exceedingly.”*

Now, how might this translate for us in making this one most-important-of-all new year’s resolution, to *“seek Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”*? SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES. It is not as hard as you may think at first. Try this one simple, doable step that could change your life: choose one of the Gospels, and determine to go through it, a half-chapter each day. This way, each day you will know where you are. Open to that place, say a simple prayer, “GOD, I AM YOURS; SHOW ME THE WAY.” Keep in your Bible a little note pad, because God will answer that prayer as you read, with little bullet point thoughts. Jot them down, with the date attached. You will learn something each day; but then there will be some days when you are blown away with the timing and the relevance of that scripture to your life.

I have been saved from more disasters than I can count; I have been refreshed from more days of depression or anxiety than I care to remember; I have been guided by more scriptures, or ideas sparked by Jesus' life, than I ever would have imagined, . . . simply by opening up the Gospels and reading my apportioned half-chapter that morning. Let me show you what I mean.

It was 2001; Andrea and I were out in California to visit our son, a Freshmen at the University of Southern California. Things were not going well. His grades were poor; we found out he had been sleeping through a number of classes; and there I was, on the morning we were to have breakfast with him, planning my lecture. I was ticked off, to say the least. As I was planning to read the riot act to my son, my mind was going off—cha ching, cha ching, cha ching . . . All this costly education, wasted! We were to leave as soon as Andy finished getting ready, and so I thought, well, I'll do my reading. I was going through Paul's letter to the Colossians at the time, and I was in the 3rd chapter of the letter, so I opened and I read,

"Fathers, do not be harsh with your children, or they may lose heart."

(Colossians 3:21)

It hit me between the eyes, of course, That one verse changed everything. It changed the way I saw my son. Instead of an irresponsible kid who was sleeping through his expensive classes, I saw a struggling young man who was feeling so much like a failure, close to "losing heart," and just hadn't figured out yet how to do school. It changed the spirit of our conversation. It changed our relationship . . . and ultimately, the grace I brought to that conversation helped him turn things around. I'm so grateful.

Finally, the Wise Men sought Christ—expectantly, scripturally, . . . and OBEDIENTLY. That is, if we are on this "treasure hunt" to seek Christ, to watch how He lived, what He taught, how He loved, and how He suffered . . . then we will experience Christ in our lives. We will see circumstances happen in our lives and people crossing our paths that are mysteriously reminiscent of what we had just read earlier that day. And through it all, we will sense Christ nudging us in this direction or that.

The Wise Men were nudged not to go back to Herod. They were obedient seekers, and so *"they went back to their country by another way."* And that made all the difference. They weren't going to mess around with Herod anymore. They weren't going to play the world's games, believe the world's promises, or be intimidated by the world's threats. In Thoreau's language, they were going to "march to the beat of a different drummer."

Will you join me on this great “treasure hunt,” as we join those Wise Men in falling down before Him, and find “*all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*”?

Alleluia! Amen.