

## “Still seeking”

*Matthew 2:1-12 (January 8, 2023)*



Picture me and Lindsay on vacation. We’re strangers in a place we do not know. We have a map. But the map is only useful if you know where to begin. We’ve been driving in circles for the last 20 minutes. There is nothing familiar, nothing to orient us. We are well and truly lost.

“Let’s stop at the next place, and you can ask directions,” I suggest. *You* meaning Lindsay. But she has other ideas. “Why don’t you go in,” she says. “After all, you’re the driver. And anyway, you’re better at this.”

Ha! Better? I’m terrible at asking directions. I feel foolish. Perhaps it’s my male ego kicking in. Men, *some* men I should say, are notoriously hesitant when it comes to asking for help.



So, in light of all that, what we have in our Gospel reading today is a sort of miracle. Three men arrive in a city they do not know, asking for directions. They must have attracted attention. They were obviously well-to-do. Perhaps with a large retinue of servants and camels.

Did I say there were *three* of them? We don’t actually know that. All we know about is the three gifts they carried in their treasure chests – gold, frankincense and myrrh. They brought them to present to a king.

“Where is he?” they want to know. “Who do you mean?” the locals ask. “The child,” the wise men say. “The one who is born to be king of the Jews.”

At this, ears perked up. And tongues all over town began to wag. And it wasn’t long till word of these visitors reached the palace, and the incumbent king, Herod. Who was disturbed. He knew nothing about a new-born king.



Journey of the Magi,  
by Andrea del Sarto, 1511.



And here we discover a great and terrible irony: These *strangers* seem to know more than the hometown crowd! They arrived in Jerusalem ready to present their gifts. But the people who lived there were clueless! Worse than clueless: Herod was openly hostile. He talked a good line. “Let me know when you find him,” he says, “so I can pay him homage.” Of course he has no intention of that.



Herod was a ruthless dictator, who cared only about one thing: holding on to power – as most dictators do. The news that *another* king might be waiting in the wings threatened him. “Messiah or not,” he thinks, “I’m getting rid of this child.”

Herod feigns piety and devotion. But really, he tries to use these visitors for his own destructive purpose. He hasn’t seen a star. Nor is he familiar with his own Jewish scriptures. It’s embarrassing, really!

The visitors arrive eager to welcome the promised one of God. But the local folk are oblivious to the great thing that is taking place among them.

“Where’s the child?” “What child?” “We’ve seen his star.” “What star?”



There’s something about these visitors you should know. They weren’t from Jerusalem or even from the far flung hinterland of Herod’s kingdom. They were not of Jewish ethnicity or faith.

But that doesn’t mean they *were* God’s people. On this Epiphany Sunday we’re being shown the amazing truth that the gift of Jesus is for *everyone*, not just a select few. His kingdom is one that embraces all sorts of people, from many different places.

And that must have stretched Herod’s way of thinking. Maybe it stretches ours as well.

The Magi, we call them. From the East: the land of Persia, or present day Iran. They were probably practitioners of Zoroastrianism, an ancient middle eastern religion. They studied the stars. And they saw *something*, a portent in the heavens, that pointed them toward the land we call holy. Toward a child we call the Christ.

And so began their long journey, their quest. They were seekers. They were searching to discover God’s work in the world.



Christian theologians sometimes speak of God’s self-revelation to humanity in two different ways. They speak of a *general* revelation through the created order.

The apostle Paul said that God’s power and divine nature are seen through the things that God has made. (Romans 1:20) We call this the “Big Book” of revelation. And it’s found in the world all around us. When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, it’s because they’ve read the big book of God’s creation. They’ve seen a star that has led them on their journey.



But now they need *another* book. And this is where the Jewish people can help. Because over the centuries they have come to know this God who spoke to them and delivered them and cared for them. And all of that sacred story has been treasured and preserved. So now, when the Magi ask, Herod’s scholars can point to the very place of Messiah’s birth: “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they said, “for so it has been written.”

The Magi have one book, the *figurative* book of God’s creation. The Jewish people have a *literal* book, the scriptures that they cherish. The Magi need what Jerusalem has. But is Jerusalem wise enough to see it?



Are any of us wise in our dealings with *others*? Can we see how the amazing, ever-expanding, grace of God is moving in the world?



Adoration of the Christ Child by the Three Wise Men, detail, by Correggio, 1489?-1534

One writer comments: “For ever-so-long now the Church has often been seen by those outside of the Church—and not infrequently by even a good many folks inside the Church—as being a kind of *exclusive club*.”<sup>1</sup>

But here, in this story of the Magi, we see how others, outside of our circle, can see things that, for all our scripture and theology and tradition, *we* may be missing. Might others have something that you and I desperately need to hear?

In my work as pastor, I love the church, I treasure our tradition. I’ve been nurtured all my life by the teachings of scripture and the community of faith. I often find myself as a dispenser of knowledge, a proclaimer of God’s truth. And yet ... there are times when I am called not to speak but more to *listen*.

When I do that, I often hear the voice of God speaking through the lives of others. Through their experience: what they’ve seen, what they’ve heard. Do I think that God has only been present with me?

The apostle James advises that we be quick to listen, slow to speak (and even slower to anger.) (James 1:19) I find myself so often rushing to judgement. When what I really need to do is step back, and try to listen, try to understand.



There is so much more we all have to learn. “Search and you will find,” said Jesus. (Matthew 7:7) We do search. We do find! And then we find *again*. We see the life of Jesus, and listen to his words. Then, over time, we realize more and more about what they really mean.

We go *deeper* in our faith. We come to an understanding that is not just an intellectual acknowledgement, but truly a life-changing truth. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Yes! But there are depths to that love I have yet to plumb. And implications of that love that I have yet to fully realize.

Think of it this way: This bird is a Skimmer. Skimmers feed along the surface of the water. See its lower bill? It’s enlarged, which makes it easy to scoop up what is just beneath the surface. It moves quickly, so small fish have little time to dart out of the way.

Sometimes, I think we’re like skimmers, moving quickly through our lives, picking up a few small morsels of nourishment.



Black skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) in flight, skimming, Pantanal, Brazil. Photo by Charles J. Sharp.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rynchops#/media/File:Black\\_skimmer\\_\(Rynchops\\_niger\)\\_in\\_flight.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rynchops#/media/File:Black_skimmer_(Rynchops_niger)_in_flight.jpg)

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-12-31/matthew-21-12-2/>, Accessed Jan 4, 2023.



Northern Gannet, photo by Adreas Trepte.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Morus\\_bassanus\\_adu.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Morus_bassanus_adu.jpg)

This, however, is a Gannet. Gannets are the largest seabirds in the North Atlantic. Their wingspan can stretch to over two metres. Skimming the surface is not enough to sustain their lives. Instead, they dive *deep*, from great heights and at high speed. They plunge into the water where they pursue their prey. They have a voracious appetite.

Sometimes, I think, we need to be like Gannets, plumbing the depths of life God gives to us in Jesus Christ.

Which are *you*? A Skimmer or a Gannet?



We never stop searching and finding, even after we discover Jesus. Meeting Jesus is merely the first step on a life-long journey of discovery. Who knows where he will take us? ... Other than closer to God, and closer to our neighbours, ever deeper in love.

Here's another way to imagine it. Several years ago, Lindsay and I went to visit the Grand Canyon. We'd heard that it was spectacular but, like so many things in life, you never fully appreciate what that means until you experience it for yourself.



I was overwhelmed. I tried to capture what was in front of me through the lens of a camera. I quickly realized that would be impossible. Pictures are always second best to being there.

We walked along the rim. And discovered at every turn a new and even better vista spreading out before us. Just when I thought I had the picture of a lifetime, *another* one presented itself!



Lindsay wanted me to come and eat the meal she had prepared for supper. But where was I? Seeking to capture that glorious evening light! Grace upon grace! (But sometimes we have to eat as well.)

The Christian life is a *journey*. We are like those Magi, travelling great lengths to discover the amazing work of God. At every stage in our lives, there is something more. At every twist and turn, a better vista. We have only to desire it.



Herod and his gang seem to have *lost* that desire. When the Magi came knocking at the door, they had nothing to offer. They were surprised to find these strangers knew more than they.

Matthew's gospel – from the very beginning with this story of the Magi, to the very end with Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations – speaks to the ever-expanding grace of God. It invites us to *larger* vision. It calls us to dive *deeper* in our walk with Christ. It's an invitation to a journey.



I'd like to leave you with some words of a Christmas carol. It's not in our Mennonite book. It was written by a Methodist pastor who served churches in the British countryside. It goes like this:

“Wise men seeking Jesus, travelled from afar,  
Guided on their journey by a beauteous star.

But if *we* desire him, he is close at hand;  
For our native country is our Holy land.

Prayerful souls may find him, by our quiet lakes,  
Meet him on our hillsides when the morning breaks.

In our fertile cornfields while the sheaves are bound,  
In our busy markets Jesus may be found.

He is more than near us, if we love him well;  
For he seeketh ever in our hearts to dwell.”<sup>2</sup>

Amen.



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<sup>2</sup> “Wise Men Seeking Jesus,” by James T. East, 1860-1937.