

Where Jesus Might Be Found
Matthew 2:1-12

Where might Jesus be found? This is the question of the wise men. And it's the question still being asked today.

Let me see if I can explain this a little better. Matthew introduces us to the, well, what should we call these travelers, these searchers? We don't know how many there were, but three is the traditional number, because there were three different kinds of gifts. So, who were they? Some translations simply take a Greek word and place it in the English text: magi, which can have the positive connotation of scientist or the negative one of sorcerer. It's from this word, incidentally that we get the word magic and magician.

Other translations will say "Wise Men," another perfectly respectable translation of magi.

Along about 600 AD there was an Infancy Gospel written in Armenia, a sort of embellishment of the Scripture, and from that Gospel (not to be confused with the four true Gospels) the three Wise Men were named: Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar. Their names, then, are just from a charming legend.

Now, even earlier, around 225 AD, the great early church leader and theologian Tertullian, called these travelers, Kings, which is what the famous hymn we just sang calls them. However, there is had absolutely no linguistic reason to do so: nowhere in ancient literature is "magi" ever translated as king, except by Tertullian. Of course, we can understand why: he revered Jesus and wanted Jesus to be visited by the most prestigious people possible, and kings filled the bill.

Magi, wise men, kings, and the New English Bible calls them astrologers. This makes sense, because these men were looking at the stars and believed that a star in the sky had something to do with God's activity in the world.

In our Scripture this morning, old truths are torn apart by Jesus' birth. Herod the King now finds there is a new King, and he doesn't like it one bit.

And The star portends a new way of understanding God. Astrology was prominent in the Pagan religions of the day and also in Judaism itself back then. But now, this heavenly sign, this star, points not to astrology to give meaning and coherence to life, but rather to a person, to a savior. So, the birth of Jesus upsets both Herod's world, and the Wise Men's world. To their credit, instead of seeking to

destroy Jesus, they seek to worship him.

So, their journey is both geographical, going from one place to another, and also spiritual. A journey that leads away from their old preconceptions to Jesus himself, King of the Jews, but more than king, savior of the world.

As the star burst upon the scene and upset the neat ordered universe of constellations and planets, so now does the one to whom the star points, upset all the old ways of thinking and believing. And so too does Jesus today upset our ways of looking at things, if we let him.

And so the Wise Men's journey begins. Matthew is imprecise. Did the star guide them each and every day and each and every night,

much as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day guided the children of Israel? Or, having seen the star once, did they just head in its general direction? In any case, it's a winding geographical and spiritual journey, as such journeys often are.

They get to Judea all right, but then they go to the provincial capital of Jerusalem. I wonder, did the star lead them there or did their old way of thinking: if the star indicates a new king is born, then we will look for him in the seat of power, in the capital city. But you see, when we equate Jesus with political power, then we don't find him.

Nor do we find him if we make him less than He is. The Wise Men ask: Where is the one born King of the Jews? But you see, Jesus is more than that. The shepherds understood right from the start: Unto you a savior is born. But the Wise Men did not realize at first that

Jesus was more than a king of a certain people; he was savior of all who would believe. Not that we blame the Wise Men. How could they really know?

At which point we might consider the Wise Men to be really lost. They don't recognize that Jesus is more than the King of the Jews, they end up in Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem, and now, keeping faith with protocol and tradition, they find themselves before another King, Herod. They don't discern that this is an evil man. They don't discern that to call someone King of the Jews would threaten Herod.

And so when they ask him, where is he? Herod wants to find out as well, so that he can destroy the child. The Biblical experts, using an amalgamation of Micah and 2 Samuel, tell him: the King will be born in Bethlehem, so he passes this word on to the Wise Men, and

cynically tells them, when you find the child, report back to me, so I can worship him, too.

Of course, Herod means to destroy the child, but the Wise Men don't know this. So, finally, it is Herod who sends the Wise Men to Bethlehem. And what do we make of this? Is it that evil is always present even in the midst of the most holy of our journeys, the one to find Jesus?

Or is it that God is present even in the midst of evil, that God uses even evil people to accomplish his ultimate purpose?

In any case, having left Jerusalem under the direction of Herod, they soon turn again to that God-driven star, and in due time the star stops over the place where Jesus is. Matthew calls it a "house,"

indicating that suitable lodging has since been found and the manger left behind. Our tradition says the Wise Men arrived twelve days after Christmas; Matthew 2:16, which we read last week, indicates it was about two years later. And so they come, but now there is something different about their journey.

They have let God in. They do more than honor a king who has been born. They worship him. Worship him. Begin to claim this child as the ultimate reality in their lives, at least as best they can according to what God has revealed to them thus far.

And then they offer him gifts, the famous gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Many have found allegorical meaning in these gifts. Gold reflects Jesus as king; incense, used in worship reflects Jesus as divine, and myrrh, used in embalming, reflects Jesus as crucified.

This is OK, I suppose, but we must be careful: when we use Scripture as allegory, then we can be in danger of not so much listening to Scripture as imposing our meaning on it.

I prefer to see these gifts as gifts which are part of the magicians' craft, and that when these wise men, magi, magicians give these gifts to Jesus, they are in fact giving them away, cutting them loose. Now instead of following the tools of astrology and magic, they cast all that aside in order to worship, and follow the true Lord and King. But there again, I might be reading too much into these gifts myself.

In any case, finally, they give Jesus the best gift of all. Herod has given them a command: Return to me. But instead, the Wise Men heed a higher command, that which comes from God. In a dream they are warned to go another way, and they obey that God-filled

dream rather than the command of Herod.

And that's the story of the Wise Men. So where does it leave us?

Back to the title, "Where Jesus Might be Found."

Scripture says at least this: Jesus might be found in any heart. If he was born for humble shepherds, he was also born to foreigners, to Gentiles. These Wise Men were strangers, from a different culture, a different place, but they could find Jesus, too. And so can you and I. There is something about Jesus' love that simply breaks through any barriers we might have erected, things we might have done, to keep him away. Jesus might be found in every heart. Will God find him in mine? In yours?

Jesus is found when we dare to follow God's leading in our lives,

symbolized by the star. Their culture told the Wise Men to stay home, Herod's law told them to travel a certain route, but they let God lead them to a different route. And did you notice that a star had to lead them to Jesus, but after having worshiped Jesus, no star, just the word of God whispering to them the next step of their journey was all they needed?

What about your journey this morning? Where are you trying to go? What are you hoping to find? The Wise Men learned that ultimately their journey meant little until it took them to the place where Jesus might be found.

And folks, as we come to this new year, we might think again about what it means for us to be a church, the gathered people of God. Whatever we do, whatever our plans, as the Body of Christ, we must first and always be this: a place where Jesus is found.

From Sunday School discussions to making decisions about how to spend mission money to contemplating our future as a congregation to talking to a friend or stranger around the coffee urn in the Fellowship Hall, we must take care that we speak, act, and decide only in ways that bring honor and glory to Jesus Christ. Because as the true spirit of the fellowship of Christ lives and moves among us, it becomes contagious. For after all, if folks can't find Christ in the church, then it's hard to imagine where else they might find him.

And maybe this is enough for us to contemplate this morning as we remember the Wise Men and their journey to find Christ. May those who make such a quest in 2008 always find Christ in you, in me, and in our church. Amen.