

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: The Searchers

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Scripture:

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "'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 shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Transcript:

Passage for today is Matthew 2. "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 when it rose and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all of Jerusalem with him. When he called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem, in Judea,' they replied. Then he had called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so I too may go and worship him.'

After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them and had 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, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." So Holy Spirit, please show us what these words mean to us and help us use them to help us get closer to you and pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, a couple weeks ago I told a story in a sermon about driving on windy roads in England, which made my daughter who was in the back seat carsick. And afterwards I got an email about how that same day a nine year old boy was talking to his grandmother and she asked him, what did you learn in church today?

And he said, sometimes you get nauseous, but God will show you the way. Yeah, I think that's pretty much what the sermon was about. I think that sort of makes sense. It's also kind of in a way kind of a good sentence that applies to life, right? Sometimes you get nauseous in life and God has to show you the way, and it's kind of what's going on with the story that I just read about The Magi, which we looked at this story a couple of weeks ago when and talked about King Herod, but today I want to talk about the Magi. And I don't know if they were nauseous or not, but God certainly showed them the way. Now, if you grew up in this country, you are probably familiar a little bit with this story because of the Christmas song, "We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we travel afar," right?

You've heard that song. Here's what you need to know. Everything in that song is wrong, okay? Everything in that song is wrong. First of all, they aren't kings. They're magi. That's a whole different thing. And nowhere in the Bible does it say there are three of them. I mean, there are three gifts, but I'm going to buy my wife three gifts for Christmas. That doesn't mean there's three of me. In fact, considering how long the journey was in order to make it, there were probably a lot of them. There's probably an entire caravan of them. So instead of getting our ideas about this from the song, we're just going to have to rely on the Bible to figure out what happened. And what this story shows is we're all seeking something. The Magi are seeking truth and wisdom. We're all seeking something, happiness, friendship, fulfillment, success, health.

Even when we don't think we're seeking something, we still usually want something, right? A better job or to get into a certain college or to get on a certain sports team or find a romantic

partner, things like that. We're all seeking or looking for something. What are you seeking right now? What are you seeking in your life? This story shows us how God shows us the way. So magi, they were magi, not kings. Magi were astrologers and interpreters of dreams. They probably came from what is today Iraq. So they were Arabs, foreigners who would've been viewed with suspicion by Israelites. They would've been extremely well educated. Astrology was sort of the science of the day. So they were the scientists, they were the Harvard professors of the day. They were probably wealthy, they were probably leaders. So highly educated, wealthy, influential leaders. They are not the down and out.

They are the up and in. And they're searching for wisdom and truth. And the other thing you need to know is that wherever they are mentioned in the Old Testament, they are always condemned, which to me shows that this story can't be made up because in that culture, no way would you be portraying astrologers in a positive light, not in that culture. And they see a star, maybe Jupiter and Saturn, a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn which happened around this time. They see this star. And so they start going because they probably know the Old Testament prophecies about a coming Messiah, a savior that God had been promising.

So they go searching. And this shows us a couple of things. First, it shows Jesus invites all people who are seeking. The name of this sermon series that we're doing is Invited. Because as we look at the Christmas story in the Bible, God invites all kinds of people into relationship with him and into his rescue mission, including foreigners and non-believers like the magi. Jesus invites everybody who is searching, which is all of us. Everyone asks religious questions. Whether they think they are religious questions or not, they are. How do I find real joy? What's the point of my life? How do I solve this problem I have? Do I matter? Am I popular? Am I loved? Am I safe? Do I have enough friends? Do I have enough money? Do I have enough success? Christians, atheists, old, young, everybody asks these questions.

And at heart these questions are religious, whether we think they are or not, because they are about the meaning and the purpose of our lives. Everyone asks them. Second thing we learned from this story is that even though our questions and longings are religious, religion will not meet or answer our questions and longings. And by religion I mean religious traditions, religious rituals, religiosity. In this story, king Herod calls together all of the religious leaders in Jerusalem to ask them where the Messiah is going to be born. And they say, Bethlehem, and then they do nothing about it. Bethlehem was just five miles down the road. They don't even bother to take a short little walk to check it out. These are the religious leaders. They have studied the prophecies about the Messiah their whole life. They've read books about the Messiah. They have heard sermons about the Messiah.

They have taken notes on those sermons about the Messiah. They have gone to Messiah conferences. They have gone to Messiah networking events. They are all about the Messiah. And when the Messiah shows up, Jesus, who isn't just your run of the mill Messiah, he is God coming in human form. The religious folks don't even bother to take a little stroll down the road

to see if it happened. They're completely indifferent. These are the most religious people on the planet, and they just don't care what God is doing or may be doing, which shows that even though our questions and longings are religious, religion, religiosity, religious tradition and ritual, it's not the answer. In fact, it's even worse. It's even worse than not being the answer. Religiosity makes us indifferent to the things of God. We like the trappings of religion, we like the music, we like the sermons and all of those nice feelings, and those are good things, but they can be dangerous things because they can numb us to the real, radical, making all things new power of Jesus.

We end up wanting religion more than we want Him. I mean, the God of the universe who spun billions of galaxies just showed up in human form five miles down the road. And the religious people's response is kind of like, okay, I'm afraid I can't go see that today. I got hot yoga. Sorry, can't do, no, can't do. Oh, I'm afraid tomorrow doesn't work for me either. But tell you this, how about this? After the holidays, I think I can pencil that in. It's just such a busy time of the year. Religion will not meet our deepest longings and questions. Third, the wisdom of the world won't answer our deepest longings either, because those longings are eternal and the wisdom of the world is not eternal. Every generation changes their worldview. What we believe about sex, power, marriage, politics is constantly changing from generation to generation.

And the things that we are so sure about today will become cringeworthy 50 years from now. And every generation says that they're different. Every generation says, no, no. Everything everyone believed in the past is stupid. But we have arrived at the ultimate cultural moment and everything that we think is true, we are the candle shining in universal darkness, and our truth will stand forever. Every generation says that, and every generation is wrong. Our historical arrogance is titanic. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will find cringeworthy what we think of as unalterable truth. Now the wisdom of the world can be helpful sometimes, it isn't all bad. It's just inadequate. Writer Rebecca Piper talks about going to a psychology class at Harvard University and then the next day going to a Christian Bible study. And she said, the students in the psychology class were very open about their problems.

They'd say, I'm jealous, I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm afraid. She said their openness about their problems was matched by their complete inability to know how to fix their problems. And then she went to the Bible study and it was the exact opposite. There was a lot of talk about God and his promises, but apparently they didn't have any problems because no one admitted to having any problems in the Bible study. She said the psychology class had all the problems and no answers. The Bible study had all the answers, but apparently no problems, which shows that both religious and worldly wisdom only go halfway. They tell us what we need but not how to get it. They tell us what's wrong but not how to make it right. So it's not religion that answers our deepest longings and questions that we're seeking. It's not worldly wisdom.

The answer to our deepest questions and longings is a relationship with Jesus. Now you're in church. You could have expected that to be a sermon point in a church, right? Because in a

church, that's the answer to every question. It doesn't matter what the question is. God, Jesus, Bible, it's always the answer, right? What should we have for dinner tonight? God, Jesus, Bible. So you know, you could expect that that's the answer. I know that's the answer. I know that you know that's the answer. You know that I know that you know that's the answer. We are knowledgeable people, but do we do what we know? Do we do what we know? Do we do what we know? Pause for dramatic effect and a little bit of conviction. But so often we don't. By how we spend our time, our money, by what we worry about, do we act as if relationship with Jesus is the only thing that will meet our deepest longings and answer our deepest questions.

The text says, when the magi saw the star, they were overjoyed. They weren't under joyed, they weren't adequately joyed, they were overjoyed. They were more than joyed. They were unusually joyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Why? Why did they worship? Why did they bow down? Because only Jesus answers our deepest questions and our deepest longings. When they arrived in Jerusalem, the magi said, where is the one who is born king of the Jews? They were looking for a place, but what they discover is the answer to their longings and questions is not a place, it's not a where. It's a who. Jesus. And when they find him, these powerful, highly educated, wealthy, influential leaders bow down to a baby. Their entire lives have been spent in the pursuit of wisdom and truth.

They were seeking and seeking and seeking. And yet they didn't hear any wise words from his mouth. There were no miracles. They didn't even hear a good sermon. All they saw was a child in the lap of a poor teenager. And they said, this is what we have been looking for our whole lives. And so often we church growers, and I include myself in that, don't respond to Jesus the way they did. We study him. We pray to him. We hear sermons about him. We read books about him. But we don't act like he's the solution to everything, which is what worship is, by the way. Worship is what we give our time and our energy and our attention to. It's focusing on what we think is going to help us, what we think is going to save us, what we think is going to at least give us at least a little bit of temporary joy.

Whether that's money or popularity or health or success or whatever it is. Whatever it is, whatever we are focused on, that's what we worship. And all of us worship something. The question just is what? But the magi worshiped Jesus because they recognized the answer to their deepest longings wasn't something that they thought that they needed, but someone. And they didn't find that in a book. And they didn't get that from their worldly wisdom. Their wisdom was helpful, told them they needed a messiah, but didn't tell them how to find a messiah. See, unaided reason can discern from creation that there is a creator but unaided reason cannot figure out how to get to that creator. They could not get to God. So God had to come to them in the person of Jesus at Christmas. That's what Christmas is all about. God in human form, in Jesus, coming to us.

See, in our searching, we are ultimately searching for God. But what the wise men discover and what we discover at Christmas is that the God that you are seeking is already seeking you. That's why he comes to us at Christmas. The God you are seeking is already seeking you, searching for you. And God doesn't force himself on us. He invites us into relationship with him and into his rescue mission. That's why, as I said last week, he comes as a baby. Because if the God of the universe had shown up in all his power, we would've run away in fear. So instead he comes as a baby, because a baby isn't scary. A baby invites you in. Like when you see a baby, you kind of want to hold the baby unless it starts to cry and then it's back to the parents, right? But a baby draws you in. They're not scary. God doesn't force, he invites. It's never obligation, it's invitation.

So then what? What do we do about it? So what? What do we do about it? Two action steps for this week. First, how has God been seeking you lately? That's the point of Christmas. He doesn't stay in heaven. He comes to find us. The last line of this story says that the magi, having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, returned to their country by another route. I think that is a great metaphor, that when we encounter Jesus, we're never the same. We go by a different route. And in the original Greek that this was written in, the verb used for having been warned means to give a response to someone who asks. In other words, put another way, everyone who seeks will find and be found by him because the God we are seeking is already seeking us. So how is God seeking you?

Because he is. We just don't always recognize it because we're focused on all those other things we think are going to make us happy. But the ultimate answer to our deepest longings and questions is him. It's Jesus. It's not His presents with a T, as in the things we think he can give us. It's his presence with a C that meets our deepest longings and questions. Even in the most difficult things, scary health crisis, relationship breakup, scary financial crisis. I've told you stories after stories after stories of people who are in those crises who experience God's presence. And it gives them courage and it gives them hope. So how is God seeking you? Ask him to show you that this week, because when we know we are being sought by the living God, it starts to meet our deepest longings. Maybe it's a moment in worship.

Maybe it's something someone says to you. Maybe it's a song you hear on the radio. Maybe it's a thought in your head that's not your thought. How is God seeking you? Because when you experience that, it begins to answer our deepest longings. And then second, if you know Jesus, you are sent as a living invitation to others. Jesus invites us closer so that we can invite others. We are invited to be inviters. And everybody is asking religious questions and we can be like that star was to the magi that lead people to Jesus. A very simple step would be to invite someone to join you on Christmas Eve. People who don't normally go to church are often very happy to go to church on Christmas Eve. This year, we've got six services, all different kinds of times, different kinds of music styles.

I'll be preaching at all of them except for the African praise one. And so you can come, there's lots of places, lots of spaces for you to come and bring some people. And like we did last week, we'll be giving you some invitation cards to help you do this, to help you invite people. Use them. But ultimately at Christmas, God did not send us a card. He came himself. So the card is not the invitation. You are the invitation. The card just helps. And not just Christmas Eve, but stay in relationship with those people. Be their friends. Talk to them, find out what's matters to them. Pray for them. Help them see Jesus in your life. There's a guy I know who, his name is Ron, so I'll call him Ron since his name is Ron. And he used to be a pastor. But then he quit being a pastor and went into business.

And he and his wife, when he was in business, through his business, he and his wife met a young woman who's from a country in the Middle East. And for her security's sake, I won't say which country it's from. And she was here in the US for six months. And she was very educated, very wealthy, and a committed atheist. And at one point, Ron and his wife invited, there's that word, invited her to join them at a class their church was giving where Ron was going to be giving a guest lecture that day just as a volunteer. And at the beginning of the class, there was some announcements. And one of the announcements was about what God was doing in this particular country that this woman was from. And in that moment, Ron just felt the Holy Spirit nudge him to throw away his notes and what he had planned to teach about and then just talk about what God was doing in that country that this woman was from.

So Ron did that. He threw away his notes, which tells you right off the bat that this was not a Presbyterian church. We never throw away our notes. That would be scary. But Ron threw away the notes and the conversation about her country touched something really deep inside of her. So afterwards, Ron and his wife invited, there's that word again, invited her to lunch that afternoon. And she said, she says, uh uh, uh uh, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God and nothing you say is going to change my mind. And Ron said, I know that, but we can still be friends. So they went to lunch and out of that lunch came a great friendship. And Ron and his wife would have this woman over to dinner, go to movies, things that friends do.

And along the way, they got to know her better and better. And one time she told them about how she'd had a lot of jobs because she feels restless and keeps looking for fulfillment and goes from job to job to job, but hasn't found that fulfillment yet. And they found out that in her family there's a lot of conflict and broken relationship and things like that. And after a few months of this, Ron finally said to her, well, you know what you're actually looking for is Jesus, and he can help you find that fulfillment that you're looking for. She completely ignored him. But then a few months later, for some reason, she doesn't know why, but for some reason she just decided to go to church on Easter Sunday. And later that day, she called Ron and said, Ron, I don't know why. I don't know what happened. But I prayed that prayer today.

And Ron said, what prayer? And she said, I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and lead my life. And so I guess I'm a Christian. Is that what that means? Am I a Christian? Ron said, well, yeah,

that's kind of what that means, right? And she said, it feels like he's been following me my whole life. I just decided to stop running and let him catch me. Well, a little while after that, she went back to her country, but they continued to talk via email. And she calls Ron and his wife Papa and Mama. And in one of her emails, she said, something is different in my heart. I feel his love. I feel his presence.

And that has put a love in my heart for my family that wasn't there before. And I'm finding meaning in my, hello, and I'm finding meaning in my job by how I relate to my coworkers and my job. I'm finding that fulfillment that I've always wanted for the first time in my life. Ron and his wife were like the star that led this woman to Jesus. By forming a relationship with her that led them to inviting her to church, that led to continued relationship with her. And what a joy for them to be part of changing this woman's life. Plus they got a new friend and she found what she was looking for. Now, I know what you might be thinking. Well, sure. He used to be a pastor. Easy for him. Okay, first of all, he was a businessman when all of this happened.

And second, don't be playing the pastor card on me. Okay? Being a pastor does not make it easier to talk about Jesus. It makes it harder. I have had people walk away from me at parties when they found out what I do for a living. Reminds me of my dating days. This woman was like the magi asking religious questions. But religion and worldly wisdom didn't offer her the solution or the answer to her deepest longings. But through Ron and his wife, Jesus invited her in. So how is Jesus inviting you into a closer relationship with him? And who is he sending you to as a living invitation? Jesus invites us in. And when we RSVP, we discover that our deepest longings find fulfillment in him. Our most vexing questions find their answers in him. Our deepest pain finds comfort in him.

As the Christmas song says, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Jesus. So Lord, help us to see the ways you are pursuing us. Help us to see the ways that you are seeking us. And then Jesus, in return, help us to invite others to know you as well. How are you inviting us in? Who are you sending us to as an invitation to closer relationship with you? God, thank you that when we are seeking you, we discover that you have been seeking us all along. Thank you for this, Jesus. We pray this in your name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Has there been a time when Jesus was the answer for something you were looking for? Explain.
- Who do you know who is searching for something and how can you point them toward Jesus?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.