

Seeking Answers

Menno Mennonite Church

January 7, 2024

Purpose: To normalize the questions of faith and following in the context of how we live in Christ.

Message: We seek the Christ revealed in the light of what will be even as we sit with the questions that persist.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (I will read); Isaiah 60:1-6 (please read)

Synopsis: Advent has been what it is—a time of questions. How long will we wait? What do we wait on? Now what do we do? Where are we being led? Yet many times we see questions and faith as incompatible and unacceptable. From the very beginning we see people seeking the way of Christ. The magi lead us in wondering what child is this. Yet we know that God's light has come and is coming. How are we invited to dwell in the questions of following well even while we rely on God's revelation time and again.

Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod,
after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
wise men from the East
came to Jerusalem, ² asking,

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?
For we observed his star at its rising,
and have come to pay him homage.”

³ When King Herod heard this,
he was frightened,
and all Jerusalem with him;
⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people,
he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men
and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,
“Go and search diligently for the child;
and when you have found him,
bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out;
and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,
until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

¹¹ On entering the house,
they saw the child with Mary his mother;
and they knelt down and paid him homage.

Then, opening their treasure chests,
they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² And having been warned in a dream
not to return to Herod,
they left for their own country by another road.

It is not an accident that we just entered January. Yes; I know—we all picked that up when we turned the calendars over on Monday and started the new year. Personally, I appreciated the revelation that I could have my celebration and my sleep by the simple expediency of searching out New Years Eve on Youtube. You had the whole menu of celebrations, some already many hours old, could enjoy and still get a good night's sleep. But back to January: it is there on purpose and starts out the year purposefully. This is Janus' month, the Roman god of beginnings and endings and was adopted by the Gregorian calendar. Janus, if you have ever seen him, is one of the transitional depictions with faces both facing front and looking back. As such, you could commonly find Janus depicting guarding spaces-- a courtyard, city, or what have you, facing both that which is being protected and what is being protected against. This is a marker of transition, of marking what comes next, even while we are ever mindful of what has been. While I don't put a whole lot of stock into Janus' power to begin and end wars, cause volcanos to erupt, or the other powers attributed to him by the cult of the ancients, there is little denying it is a powerful image for much of life at this time of year. Because it captures both our preoccupation with what is new and fresh and next, while acknowledging that where we have been and what comes behind us has a pretty powerful influence over where we might be going.

This kind of makes sense for the moment in the year, in our lives. Ours are seasonal existences. Sure, we have the common seasons of winter, spring, summer, fall with all that go with them. But we have other seasons too—moments of satisfaction and worry, anticipation and contemplation, positivity and concern. We know all of these well. Sometimes the season of the year also influences the season of our hearts. As an academic this was the time of year where I would be drawn to look into a new semester and become convinced that there was no possible way that I was going to complete the work that laid in front of me in the semester described. Compound that with the reality that Northern Indiana is almost permanently embedded in gloom from November to March being down wind of Lake Michigan, and January usually had me dreading life and being a bit down. Even starting the new year can push us in some ways as we have to both look back at what has been and look ahead toward what might be next. Often we find ourselves needing a certain double mindedness about this time in our lives about now looking both directions at once to find what we may be missing in leaving one era behind and

that which is about to be as we step into the next. Knowing and tending the seasons of our souls is something that we do well to engage always, but especially at times like these.

The Magi are inseparable to our notion of nativity. Our sets would be empty without them. Anyone who has done any sort of Christmas pageant knows that these are some of the roles that just need to be filled. Yet their place in the story is a bit odd when you think about it. We know little of them from the scriptural record. A lot of the names and notions we carry for them are from other traditions and sources. Matthew is the only account we have of them, and he only gives the broadest of sketches.

What is clear, though is that they are outsiders coming into the ways and place of Israel in ways that shake things up. They were the ones who come seeking. They were the ones who noted the coming of a star, the rise of a king. They are the ones who prompt the other wise ones—the learned scholars of Torah and law that Herod for his own purposes inquires of them to check out their story. They were learned, they knew the scriptures, but they weren't particular looking for what ended up happening right under their noses. There is always a bit of a wonder why it took outsiders from afar to reveal the promise that had been told of for years. Perhaps it was the way that the expectations of the culture stood in the way of their being seen. Herod is known for many things, but being kind hearted is not one of them. When the one who is presently king is on guard, it is generally not a good idea to suggest that there might be another who is yet to come. In the canonical context of the Bible, perhaps the Magi and the gifts they bring remind Matthew's audience that even representatives of a long-ago Persian king recognize their place before this one who, in their own words, is born king of the Jews.

However they function in the contours of the story being told, I sometimes wonder whether we know what to do with them. In our nativity sets we have the child full of wonder, the parents full of grace and amazement, the shepherds who were brought there by divine authority and then the magi giving the whole thing a sense of royal occasion. At least that is how we usually put it to use. What's more, it is about time for those things to get packed away if they haven't already. We are done with all this for this year, and likely you are ready to leave it alone. Perhaps given the way that the worshipping calendar has worked out this year you are well tired of my asking you to consider one more thing when your reverence has already been spent.

Yet I hold them out to you today as good traveling companions for this moment of change and noting the seasons around us. For it is here at this time that we are reminded that

revelation does not only come in the form of choirs of angels proclaiming the good news, but also within the contemplation and courage of strangers looking for something that, perhaps, we are not. Sometimes the good news arises from the signs that must be discerned, its full value only being understood along the way and after a great journey. Maybe as we look back into what has been we can see the moments of grace that we have been offered: the right word at the right time, receiving the sense of God's Spirit when you needed it most, the moment of grace and understanding given you when you were perhaps not looking for it. Look not only to what has been with its accomplishments and disappointments, its celebrations and heartaches. Look not only to the future with its promises of hope, nor to its fearful implications of what could go wrong, what might happen, or the way the sky might fall. Rather hold both in view; what has been and what will be, and spend some time giving thanks for the light that has been and that will be revealed. Spend some time considering what star you might be seeking and where you might go looking for it. Maybe the magi come at this tail end of the story because they are the companions we need to allow the revelation of God with us to further its good work of translating itself from simple good tidings to the sign and wonder that portends that which we need in the world—the change that is ours and that are coming to a wanting world.

Several years ago, we offered you the opportunity to follow after God in the shape of a Star Word; a gift, a word from God that is meant to speak. We have heard from many of you of your experience and your work with them, and we would like to offer you the opportunity to enjoy them again this year. They are random to be sure, but as is so often the case, it is sometimes those things that we don't design and customize that end up speaking loudly to you. Sometimes, you may like what you hear. Other times, the gift might come to you as a challenge; perhaps even a big one. But who is to say whether the challenge is of value or not? In those cases, you may draw a second word if you wish, but after you have given it some time to be with you. Perhaps come seek out another word after church or in the weeks to come. Of course, if this is not what you wish to do, you can skip this as well. Yet I invite you to try something new and to see what might dawn by journeying with what God is doing within you.

Our world is full of signs and wonders. Our lives are full of 'stars in the east.' Even in the vast periods of time that defy our very imaginations, there are always things that would call to us, speak to us, lead us onward, if we have eyes to see them and courage to but take that first step and follow where it leads. Not every light in the sky that catches our eye is

worth following, is worth setting out on a quest to find. Often, we become so overwhelmed with choosing between the sparkling invitation to the quest and the glittery distraction that will lead us nowhere, that we stop looking for the rising star inviting us into what God is doing here and now. And even if we do see it, we often are pressed to wonder whether it is we who are called to follow, we who must embark on the quest into something new, something foreign, in the faint hope of finding something of value. Surely not I Lord might be our basic response. We end up wondering why anyone would leave hearth and home to take on something so fool-hearty as seeking an epiphany, seeking again the revelation of God in our midst in our time, in our place.

Yet, here we stand at a new year, looking both forward and back. It is hard not to examine the sky at a moment like this and see what the stars might be say. We are invited to ask ourselves in this time, in this place ‘what is it that I seek’ and what might God be seeking in me? What are you seeking? These wise men had their eyes wide open, frantically searching for a sign, for something to lead them. Are we open to the signs of the horizon? Are we listening for God’s word and looking for the Kingdom of God in our midst?

May God speak to us each and move us as God wills in what ever season we find ourselves.