

“WHERE’S THE NEW KING?”
Psalm 149:1-5, Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
January 6 & 7, 2024

“During several summers in the 1950s, Howard Mumma, a Methodist pastor, served as a guest minister at the American Church in Paris. After Sunday service one day, he noticed a man in a dark suit surrounded by admirers. Albert Camus [the author] had been coming to church, first to hear Marcel Dupr, playing the organ, and later to hear Mumma's sermons.

“Mumma became friends with the existentialist Camus, who by then was famous for his novels *The Plague* and *The Stranger* and for essays such as "The Myth of Sisyphus." The two men met to discuss questions of religious belief that Camus raised. Mumma, at 92, kept the conversations confidential for over 40 years before deciding to share them. In one conversation, Camus told Mumma:

“The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing—and no one else knows. Certainly the public and the readers of my novels, while they see that void, are not finding the answers in what they are reading. But deep down you are right—I am searching for something that the world is not giving me. . . .

Camus continued, “In a sense we are all products of a mundane world, a world without spirit. The world in which we live and the lives which we live are decidedly empty. . . . Since I have been coming to church, I have been thinking a great deal about the idea of a transcendent, something that is other than this world. It is something that you do not hear much about today, but I am finding it.

“One of the basic teachings that I learned from [philosopher Jean-Paul] Sartre is that man is alone. We are solitary centers of the universe. Perhaps we ourselves are the only ones who have ever asked the great questions of life. Perhaps, since Nazism, we are also the ones who have loved and lost and who are, therefore, fearful of life. That is what led us to sense that there is a great Idea or powerful Influence—but there is something that can bring meaning to my life. I certainly don't have it, but it is there. On Sunday mornings, I hear that the answer is God.

“You have made it very clear to me Howard, that we are not the only ones in this world. There is something that is invisible. We may not hear the voice, but there is some way in which we can become aware that we are not the only ones in the world and that there is help for all of us.”¹

Spiritual hunger is a world-wide condition, and many are beginning to look to the Christian Church to find the answers they need to the questions they have. They are asking questions like: “Where did I come from? Am I important? What value do I have? Where can I find meaning for my life? Is there anything for me beyond this life?” They are finding the same emptiness that Albert Camus had and they are looking for answers. Another big question for me is: “Are they finding the answers here?” My hope is, yes.

You see, the Christian Church has the very answers that people are seeking. Christian teaching says we are created in the image of God, so we are both physical and spiritual beings who need direction from the One who created us. We have the capacity to reason, to think, and to create for our own, and the Spirit within us is a gift of God that enables us to communicate with Him to learn about Him so that we might also follow Him.

In God’s eyes, all humanity is important, and everyone is valuable in His sight. So valuable, in fact, that He wants all people, everywhere, to find Jesus as their Savior, God’s own Son, who came to save all people from the wages of sin, which is eternal death. Sin destroys life, but Jesus came so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. In His life, death and resurrection, Jesus offered up Himself as our perfect Sacrifice, so that when we put our trust in Him as our Savior, our sins are atoned, and we are granted eternal life with Him. God so loves everyone, and desires that we find His Salvation through Jesus Christ, so that we can be with Him when the years of our lives here come to an end.

If we try to live our lives without God’s presence, without Jesus Christ being our Savior and Lord, the purpose of our life is veiled, and we merely strive to survive as long as we can, enjoying whatever pleasures we can until our life ends. But the meaning and purpose of our lives are revealed to

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 137-138)

us only through Jesus Christ, and God gifts us with particular abilities and skills through His Holy Spirit, to do the work of the Lord while we are here. Our ultimate purpose here on the earth is to serve God in all that He has called us to do.

But the lure of the world is very strong, and many are held captive to its ways. To those who rely only upon the things of this world, life here is all they will enjoy, for beyond this life there is a judgment that will determine how we will spend eternity - in God's presence, or in God's absence. God's presence involves peace, and joy, and comfort, and healing, and rest from our weariness. It is eternal life. God's absence, on the other hand, involves misery, anguish, torment, pain, sorrow, and eternal death. What we choose to do with Jesus Christ determines our ultimate destination. The most important question for each person in the world to ask is - "Will I let Jesus become my Savior and Lord?"

I raise this issue here on the first Sunday of the New Year because it corresponds with the spiritual hunger of those who sought out Jesus while He was still a young child. For all those who are searching for answers for their life, I invite you to hear the account of the Magi who went a very long way to find the One they were searching for - Jesus. Listen to the account found in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 2, verses 1-12. (READ Matthew 2:1-12).

Now Magi were those among the priestly caste in ancient Media and Persia who were in line with medicine men or shamans. They were men who were diligent in researching the facts of nature, and that included the study of the stars. They were often lifted to high positions within the ruling elite because of their vast "knowledge." Some of these "wise men" were given the ability to interpret dreams and some were able to interpret the stars in order to forecast the future.

The Magi that Matthew recorded are ones that knew "the stars and understood their meaning; this knowledge was a science which was deeply rooted in various peoples of the ancient Orient... While Matthew does not identify the Magi (nor can we), it appears that they have come from far away. They are not Hebrews; their questions indicate this. They are pagans. The wonder, mystery, and reverence of

the Magi are tribute to the Messiah from unnamed peoples; and the world's oldest learning pays homage." (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 3, K-Q, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985] pg. 223)

The message of the stars so intrigued these men enough to drive them to search for more information. Their quest for learning and discovering the truth took them from their homeland, and brought them to the city of Jerusalem. We don't know how many there were, but the popular concept is that there were three, based upon the number and types of gifts they presented. But there could have been more. We are not told.

The thought that they might be kings comes from Psalm 68:29 and 72:10, which tell of kings bearing gifts to the king of Israel. But Matthew's account also indicates that there was a spiritual emptiness within these travelers to the extent that they sought out fulfillment and understanding of who the new king of the Jews was. Their spiritual hunger moved them deeply enough to search out the answers for the questions that they had. So they came seeking "*the one who was born king of the Jews*" (Matt. 2:2). They had come to worship the One that the stars told about.

Now, it is interesting to me how God uses a variety of means to draw us closer to Him. In some instances, an illness or injury causes us to be still long enough to ponder the need for God in our lives. In others, it is the loss of loved ones, or even the loss of stability in our lives that drive us to seek the filling of the emptiness within us. Sometimes it happens in retirement, when folks stop working a particular job and are left searching for something to fill in the void they are feeling. And sometimes it happens when our interest is perked by our desire to learn more. But God uses a whole range of incidents and opportunities to get our attention and get us to discover the need for Him to be the Lord of our lives. The spiritual hunger pangs get to a point where our whole attention is focused on satisfying them. And it's at that time when we move into action.

Take for instance, this account found in a prayer letter to supporters of the evangelist, Billy Graham. He says: "I recently heard the story of a mother in an African nation who came to Christ and grew strong in her commitment and devotion to the Lord Jesus. As so often happens, however, this

alienated her from her husband, and over the years he grew to despise and hate her new devotion to Christ. His anger and bitterness reached their climax when he decided to kill his wife, their two children and himself, unable to live in such self-inflicted misery. But he needed a motive.

“He decided that he would accuse her of stealing his precious keys - the keys were to the bank that he worked at, their house, and the car. Early one afternoon he left his bank job and headed for the tavern. His route took him across a footbridge extended over the headwaters of the Nile River. He paused above the river and dropped the keys. He spent all afternoon drinking and carousing.

“Later that afternoon, his wife went to the fish market to buy the evening meal. She purchased a large Nile perch. As she was gutting the fish, to her astonishment, in its belly were her husband’s keys. How had they gotten there? What were the circumstances? She did not know; but she cleaned them up and hung them on the hook.

“Sufficiently drunk, the young banker came home that night and pounded open the front door shouting, ‘Woman, where are my keys?’ Already in bed, she got up, picked them off the hook in the bedroom, and handed them to her husband. When he saw the keys, by his own testimony he immediately became sober and was instantly converted. He fell on his knees sobbing, asked for forgiveness, and confessed Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.”² God works in mysterious ways to guide people back to Him.

Matthew’s Gospel tells of the Magi coming to Jerusalem searching for the “*one who has been born King of the Jews*” (Matt. 2:2). They expected that a new king would be born of an existing king living within the capital city. But Herod had no new born baby boys. He also didn’t want anyone else to take over his place as King of Judea.

So the quest began from Herod to find this “new born king” and eliminate him. He wormed the vital information from the Magi, and when he was informed that Bethlehem was the prophesied place where the new king was to be born, he sent them on their way to seek and find the child. We’ll learn

² (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 149)

more about Herod's desperate plan to kill the child next week.

But the Magi were delighted to get the proper directions and the king's approval, to continue their search for the child. So, continuing to follow the star that lead them to Jerusalem, they persisted in their journey.

In all of the modern renditions of the Nativity account, the producers all have the Magi showing up at the stable where Jesus was born. However, in contrast to those renditions, here in Matthew's account we see that by this point Mary and Joseph were living in a house, and Jesus is no longer an infant, but a child. So that means that Jesus could have been anywhere between 9 months and a year and a half old by the time the wise men arrive. Joseph is missing from the house at the time of their arrival, probably because he would have been working in Bethlehem, earning a living for him and his new family.

This had been a serious journey that the Magi had made to seek the One the stars told them would be the King of the Jews. Their journey did not dissuade them from their goal of finding the answers of their questions. Each day, there could have been greater and greater anticipation and excitement for them, wondering about who the child would be and what they would do to honor him. But their hearts were set on finding the "new king," so they were not put off by the length of their travels.

Many times in our own lives, our journey of faith takes years in the making. Rarely is there an instant conversion like the young banker, but rather a slow progression of our coming to know who Jesus is, and our acceptance of Him as our Savior. In fact, a person may live their whole life without coming to know Jesus, only at the end, when death stares them in the face, to they come to acknowledge the need for Jesus to be in their life. So we should not be discouraged at the long process that some take to come to know the Lord. Keep praying for them with great anticipation of what God is going to do to bring them back to Him. It's not that God is slow to answer our prayers, but He waits until just the right time for each of them to come to a point where they have to make their decision about Jesus.

When the Magi came into the house of Mary and Joseph and saw the Child, Jesus, instantly they recognized Him as the One they had been searching for. Since the star had miraculously pointed out the very place where Jesus was, imagine the excitement these men had at coming into the very presence of the King of the world! Matthew tells us that “*they bowed down and worshiped Him*” (Matt. 2:11). They suddenly came to believe that the message of the stars was true, and right here in the humble home of Mary and Joseph was the object of their long search. And out of adoration for the privilege of being before the King of kings, these men then offered great gifts - gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were gifts fit for a king, but it was what they had to offer Him.

When we come to find that Jesus is the fulfillment of our life’s longing, when we come to understand that Jesus is the One to fill our spiritual emptiness, there is great excitement and rejoicing. The ones who find Him as their Savior are changed and there is a marvelous transformation that begins in them. The old things of life are exchanged for the new things of Christ Jesus. The way we see life changes; the way we see others changes; the way we live changes; even the way we speak and think changes. Having our spiritual hunger satisfied by Jesus Christ reforms all the other parts of us, and we are filled with a desire to grow closer to Him and to follow Him in whatever ways that we can.

I can only imagine the differences these Magi had in their lives as they returned home. The first major change was to obey the instructions of the dream they had received, and the decision not to return to Herod to tell him where the new King was. They went home by a different route than they had come, possibly going way out of their way to avoid any repercussions from Herod when he finds out they did not follow his request to report back to him. Magi were accustomed to obeying those in leadership, because it often led them to greater wealth and approval, giving them even more opportunities to serve. But these men decided to bypass any possible reward for their information, and they returned home instead.

But as they went home, their hearts were different. They may have treated the rest of the traveling party differently than when they had started their journey. They may have had opportunities to

be in service to others as they returned to their homeland. They may even have been able to share the exciting news of their finding the new King of the Jews with the ones they encountered along the way. We just don't know how many different ways seeing Jesus affected them.

But we can see the changes that take place in the hearts and minds and lives of those who come to know Jesus today. People turn from various addictions to find value and purpose in new ways. People may even change careers because they find how the Lord Jesus is guiding them into different fields of ministry. People begin to look out beyond themselves to see the needs of others around them, and they begin working at meeting those needs. People start looking at the lives of the people around them and begin to interact with them in ways that help them to find Jesus in their life, too. Great changes come to those who encounter the "new born King of the Jews," Jesus. And they begin living the difference that Jesus makes in them so that God is glorified in all that they do.

The world is longing for answers on filling the spiritual emptiness in their lives. We have the answers, and if we have seen Jesus and come to trust Him, too, then we can begin to help the world find fulfillment and joy and peace and hope and love unlike anything the world can provide.

Have you found Jesus, the newborn King of the Jews? Have you trusted in Him and let Him become your Savior, and the Lord of your life? Find the renewed joy and excitement that He gives to all who will follow Him. It will make such a difference in your life, and it will make such a difference in the lives of those around you, too. Let's pray.

Father, Thank You for sending Jesus to the world as Messiah and Lord. Thank You that we have the chance to seek Him and find Him so that our lives can become transformed through the power of His love. Let Your Holy Spirit fill each one here today, so that we all may find the excitement and joy and purpose that only Jesus can give to us. And then as we are filled with Your power, enable us to boldly tell others about our own experience of finding Jesus as the Lord of our lives. Then lead us to people who also need to find the same life and love You have given to us. Use us, Lord, to take the message of Jesus Christ into the whole world. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.