

## CHRISTMAS SURPRISES: THE SEARCHERS (Matthew 2:1-12)

This movie was released in 1956. That was 64 years ago. It is rated by the American Film Institute as the Best Western movie ever made. It occupies the 12<sup>th</sup> spot on AFI's top 100 movies of all time. That puts it one place ahead of *Star Wars* and two places behind *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie had an all-star cast with John Wayne playing the leading role, and a very young Natalie Wood, who was just 15, also graced the screen. Legendary director John Ford provided his expert leadership in the making of *The Searchers*.

I have borrowed the title of that movie for the title of today's sermon. Our text is Matthew 2:1-12. The Bible calls them the Wise Men or the Magi, but I'm going to call them the Searchers. These searchers were seeking someone, and they went to great effort and great expense to find Him. Their search proved to be successful. Matthew is the only Gospel that tells us about the Wise Men.

You can learn much about a person when you discover what he or she is seeking.

- You can tell I am absent-minded and disorganized because I am often searching for my keys.
- I have decided that every washing machine I have ever owned eats random socks because I am often searching for the missing pair.
- I am a bit OCD because I have to find a blue ink pen to write with and to underline when I am reading a book. I can't use a pen with black ink because the text is black; so, the pen has to be blue.

What do you find yourself searching after? It may say more about you that you care to admit. Is it food? Is it money? Is it love? For what are you looking?

The Bible has some promises about searching. Jesus said, "Seek and you will find?" That promise is sandwiched between two others: "Ask and you will receive . . . Knock and the door will be opened to you." I think Jesus was talking about prayer. I think Jesus was talking about prayer and growing intensity in prayer. First, you ask, and then you begin to search, and eventually you are banging on heaven's door in prayer.

Earlier in that same sermon, Jesus commanded, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." The "these things" of which He spoke were things like clothes to wear, food to eat, and something to drink. In other words, God will take care of your temporal, physical needs if you seek His help with your spiritual and eternal needs.

In the book that bears Jeremiah's name, God promised, "You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

The truth of the matter is that we are usually successful in finding whatever it is that we are searching for if we are willing to look hard enough to find it. That means, if we don't look for anything, we will find that, too.

What are you willing for with all your heart?

Part of looking for something with all your heart involves recruiting someone else to help you in the search. That's why when I am looking for my keys, I ask Ruth Ann, "Have you seen my keys?" Then, she graciously gets up and joins me in the search for those elusive keys.

When I open the refrigerator looking for something, I, like most males, believe that the only things that are in the fridge are those things that are in my field of vision. That means, if I can't see it, it must not be there. I ask, "Ruth Ann, have you seen the mayonnaise?" She walks over, takes one look, and moves one object to reveal the presence of what I was looking for that was not in my field of vision.

In addition to searching for worthwhile things, we should also help others who are searching for what we, by God's grace, have already found. The story of the Searchers provides clues as to how we help others.

### **Since Searchers Follow the Light They Have, Let's Shine Our Light Brightly**

The Wise Men were Magi. They weren't kings; they were scholars. They had been schooled in science, astronomy, astrology, and medicine.

Listen to what Mark Batterson said about the Magi:

The other thing you need to know about these Magi is that they were thoroughly, completely, top to bottom, pouring-of-out-their-pores pagan. These guys were pagan to the bone. That's the culture they came out of. The word *Magi* forms the root of the word *magicians*. These were magicians. Their magic was not some act . . . where they pulled . . . rabbits out of hats. No, they believed thoroughly in the power of magic. They were steeped in it. And they were astrologers. They believed the stars predicted the future and told your fate. These guys were as pagan as pagan can get.

But somewhere along the way, these men had heard that a Jewish king would be born, and He would bring peace to the world. I imagine they were familiar with the writings of Daniel who once lived where they came from. When they observed a never-before-seen celestial object, somehow, they linked the appearance of that "star" with the birth of this promised king. They were convinced this sign in the heavens was a heavenly announcement of the Messiah's birth.

They were so convinced, they set out in search of this child. Their journey may have been as long as 1000 miles. We don't know how long it took them to make that trek. Look at v.16. Jesus may have been walking by the time the Wise Men arrived. They certainly didn't see Him lying in the manger. By this time, Joseph and Mary lived in their own dwelling. Look at what our text says in v. 11.

These Wise Men were searchers. They followed the light they had as little as it was. God used a star, what they were familiar with, to motivate them to begin their long and arduous journey. God provided further light when they arrived in Jerusalem. It was there

they learned the Scriptures foretold the birth of a Messiah, and that the Scriptures named Bethlehem as the birthplace. Then, the Lord provided further light. Look at vv.9-11a. God was guiding them each step of the way.

I love the way they responded to seeing the star after their meeting with Herod. My version uses the words, “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (v. 10). One translator rendered it, “They were beside themselves.” Peterson put it, “They could hardly contain themselves.” We need to keep in mind the Wise Men weren’t searching for a star, they were searching for a king.” The star was just a tool to get them to the object of their real search.

Reading the Bible can, should, and will be a joyous experience, but the Bible is a tool God gives us so they we can find Jesus. I have faith in the reliability of the Bible. I don’t believe the Bible contains God’s word. I believe the Bible is God’s word. I don’t, however, worship the Bible. I worship the God to whom the Bible points.

Some people, however, don’t accept the Bible as God’s word. They don’t read the Bible. They don’t believe the Bible. For them, the Bible is not a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path. That is why we need to shine the light God has given us. Jesus looked at His disciple and said, “You are the light of the world.” Our light is like moonlight in that our light is a reflected light. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, we are to reflect the light of the son of God. We are to Him shine His light through our lives.

My Sunday School teachers back when I was a youth said, “You may be the only Bible some people will ever read.”

Paul wrote a physical letter to the Church in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 3:3, Paul wrote, “You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.”

We are a light and a letter to those who are seeking, so keep your light bright and your letter clean so it can be seen and read by all who are searching.

### **Since Searchers Question the Ones Who Know, Let’s Tell What We Have Learned**

The Wise Men traveled straight to Jerusalem and straight to Herod, the King. They must have reasoned, “If anyone would know anything about the birth of a Jewish king, it would be Herod, who is the King of the Jews.” The Wise Men unashamedly sought help from whomever could aid them in their quest.

Scripture tells us the people of God wandered in the desert for 40 years before they made it to the Promised Land. Someone noted that even back then, men refused to stop and ask directions.

If some are going to find the Lord, they must solicit help from those who have already successfully begun their journey. You may pride yourself on being a strong, independent person who doesn’t need any help from anybody, but that really isn’t anything of which to be proud.

The Christian faith is not an individual sport; it is a team sport. We are not to be Lone Ranger Christians. The pastor I had growing up said that even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.

If we are going to find the Lord, we need to talk with someone who knows Him. If you know the Lord, then you have a responsibility to help others find and get to know God.

There are people in this community who want to know God, but they don't know how to find Him. You and I need to stand ready to help them in their search. If someone asked you to introduce them to God, could you do it?

You and I live in the digital age. If we don't know something, we whip out our phones, our tablet, or some digital device, and we go to the internet because you can trust anything you might read on the internet. Right?! One favorite site of someone looking for information is Wikipedia. Wikipedia contains an untold number of articles concerning just about anything that you might want to know. It is written by people who have studied the very thing about which you are curious.

The letters, w-i-k-i stand for, "what I know is." You and I are wiki-believers. Whether you have been a Christian for 5-minutes, 5-days, 5-months, 5-years, or 5-decades, you have learned something. You have learned things about God, about the Bible, about life, and God means for you to share with someone else about what you have learned. That is our job as a witness. We simply share what we have seen, learned, and experienced.

That happened the very first Christmas:

- Gabriel told Mary the message God had for her. He knew something that she didn't, and it was his job to tell her what he knew.
- The angels knew something that the shepherds didn't, and it was their job to tell them: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord."
- The shepherds acted on the news they were given. They found the Savior. Then what did they do? The shepherds didn't just go back to their sheep and act like nothing had happened. They went and told others that they had heard, seen, and experienced.
- That is what the apostles did, and that is what Paul did. Listen to what Paul wrote many years after that first Christmas: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15).

John Stott said that Paul's witness in that one verse reveals four things about a witness. **First, it should be reliable** (*The saying is trustworthy*). **Second, it should be universal** (*deserving of full acceptance*). **Third, it should be historical** (*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*). **Fourth, it should be personal** (*of whom I am the foremost*).

You are going to come across some searchers. They may be among your family, among your friends, maybe co-workers, and possibly neighbors. They just might ask you,

“You go to church, don’t you? Well, I’ve been wondering . . .”

Listen carefully to what they ask, and listen even more carefully to be they didn’t ask but really wanted to. Then, live out the truth and guidance of 1 Peter 3:15 which says, “In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

Searchers follow the light they have; so, shine your light brightly.

Searchers question the ones who know; so, tell what you have learned.

### **Since Searchers Worship the God They Find, Let’s Join Them in Worship**

The Wise Men kept up their search until they found Christ. Once they found Him, what did they do? Look at v. 11. They worshiped Him. They worshiped Him, and they gave Him gifts as an expression of their worship.

I once saw a Christmas decoration that read, “Had it been three wise women instead of three wise men, they would have arrived on time, brought a casserole, given age-appropriate gifts, and there would be peace on earth.”

I don’t know about that, but I do know something about the connection of worship and giving. You can give without worshiping, but you can’t worship without giving. When you worship, you are inwardly compelled to give. You give your attention, your time, your heart, your gifts, your thanks, and your praise to God.

Earlier, I quoted Jeremiah 29:13, where God promises, “You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.” If you and I will sincerely seek the Lord, He will enable us to find Him. When we find Him, we need to worship Him for who He is, both Savior and Lord.

And when others find the Lord, we need to join them in worshiping our Lord and Savior. In recent years, many churches have experienced what has been what has been called *worship wars*. Church members actually fight with one another over the style of worship. Some champion traditional worship that is heavy on hymns and full choirs. Some demand more contemporary worship that uses recently written choruses and praise songs.

While we are mindlessly fighting one another from the comfort of our church buildings, the persecuted church is hiding in houses as they worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.

Let’s not get caught up with how we worship as much as with who we are worshiping.

Dr. Thomas Long, a preaching professor from Princeton Theological Seminary, spoke about a former student who came to him. She told him, “I have a secret to tell you.” When he asked what it was, she announced, “I’m pregnant.” He rejoiced with her. She and her husband had a 7-year-old girl, and they were wanting another child.

Then she added, “We just got the test results, and we know two things about our child. Our child will be a boy, and he will have Down’s syndrome. We will handle it. We

are trusting God to help us.”

At Christmas, this former student wrote Dr. Long a letter in which she told about her son, Timothy Andrew.

She wrote:

He has the sweetest disposition. Daily he shatters our images of handicapped and special needs. He may need special help, but already he is no slouch in giving us special love. We are blessed. Kate [their daughter] is Tim’s champion. Hearing our concerns about how Tim might be accepted by other kids, Kate informed the kids on our block, “My brother has Down’s syndrome and everybody’s going to play with him, or else!”

One evening we overheard her talking to Tim. “I’m so glad you’re here, Timothy. I will always love you; I’ll never leave you. I’ll always be nearby.”

There is a sense in which God sent Christ that very first Christmas as a means of saying to us, “I will always love you; I’ll never leave you. I’ll always be nearby.”

The truth of Christmas, however, is really brought home when we worship Christ, as did the Wise Men. You can worship Christ by saying to Him, “I will always love You. I’ll never leave You. I’ll always be nearby.”

I urge you to worship Christ by making and living out those declarations.

Are you going to be a sitter or a seeker? Become **a seeker**, and then, when you become **a finder**, become **a worshiper**.

Despite the horrible man that Herod was, and despite the fact that he meant to deceive the Wise Men, Herod gave those men a wise set of instructions. I want to borrow his words as my invitation to you. Look at v. 8. Search for Jesus. When you find Him, bring word to your neighbor, your co-worker, your friend, your family, that they may come and worship Him, too.