

THE MYSTERY AT THE MANGER:
WHERE IS HE?
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

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One thing is for sure about Christmas. When it's over, it's over. Down come the decorations. Away go the songs. Good cheer is bottled up for another year and goodwill is put back in the attic. It's like all this festivity is good for a little while but we wouldn't want to risk making it a way of life.

But the Church says slow down, you move too fast. Today is the 10th day of Christmas. Epiphany Sunday is a day to celebrate the visit of the Wise Men proclaiming Jesus the Light of the world. This manifestation should have more meaning to us as Gentile believers than much of the pageantry that has passed.

THE WISE MEN CAME SEEKING

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 the king of the Jews?" Matthew 2:1-2.

The greatest Christmas miracle may be that these wise men stopped and asked for directions. Who were these visitors from the East? Garrison Keillor says, "One had to be a Lutheran bearing a tuna noodle casserole for the covered dish supper."

The Bible says they were Magi—good and holy men, skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural sciences. They were searchers after truth. They were astrologers in a time when astrology was a respected science. They came from Persia, present day Iran and Iraq. They were Gentiles in a search of the Jewish King.

O'er field and fountain, moor and mountain, they followed that star. In the heat of the day and the chill of the night, still they traveled on. With saddle chaffed legs, sunburned skin, dust-caked eyes, they came seeking a Jewish Messiah. No, they didn't know the Torah, couldn't recite the Ten Commandments, and maybe knew nothing about Jewish prophecy. They were just tired old sinners hungry for a spiritual dinner.

Gaspar was one of those who came at that time. I suspect you could tell us, Gaspar, what were you seeking when you came?

Gaspar: "We arrived on the scene weary and too late for the actual birth; but from all reports it would seem to have been a normal procedure: no visions, visitants, portents, unless, of course, you consider the star that led us all that

dreadful way (a matter of celestial science, actually, hardly a sign available to the public at large). Oh yes, there were local peasants who claimed to have seen a whole sky full of angels but had only their sheep for witnesses; that, and a look of late and joyous dignity. We had brought gifts—gold for prosperity, frankincense for atmosphere and sweetness, myrrh, a preservative symbolizing his ability to overcome even in the worst of times. Unusual items to be sure, but proper in this case, knowing what we do today about the fate of the recipient.

“I speak of the infant thus because I have no other words with which to name the child we saw and recognized, and failed to recognize. The thing is, you see, I felt throughout a sense that all our journey was nothing at all, a single step in comparison to the distance and the proximity we met within that broken manger. Near and far ceased to exist. Everything and everywhere was present; present also in the sense of given, gifted once, for all, forever. We had not come to him, but he to us, and the birth that, as I said before, we really missed, took place anyway in us, in everything that night; takes place again right now as I recall the way it was to give a gift and then receive this present in return.”

Dr. Olds: Let me understand. We had not come to Him but He to us. Is that what you said? What a revelation. And the birth we really missed took place anyway in us, in everything that night. Thank you, Gaspar.

THERE IS A HUNGER IN OUR HEARTS THAT THE WORLD CANNOT SATISFY.

Their story parallels our story. That’s why we need to hear it again. They didn’t know where to go, or what they would find when they got there. They went looking for one thing and found another. Most of all they discovered they had not come to Him but He to us.

Maybe it’s because I am a pastor, but I sense there is a spiritual hunger in America of fast growing proportions. We can’t buy enough toys, have enough money, travel enough places to fill the void inside. We hunger for meaning and purpose. We want to know that life matters and that we can make a difference. We want to know God so we search for him and feel for him though he is not far from any one of us.

Ann Sullivan approached her deaf and blind student Helen Keller and said, “Today I am going to teach you about God.” Ms. Keller signed her teacher “Good, I’ve been thinking about Him for a long time.”

Larry King of Larry King Live says, “I have a lot of respect for true people of faith. I have always searched. I envy people who have it. I just can’t make the leap.”

A mother says, “When my four-year-old pointed to a crucifix and said, ‘What’s that man doing, Mom?’ I knew it was time to get back to church.”

THEY LEFT SEEING

The great “I Am” encounters those “who are.” The Alpha and the Omega is in the now. The Eternal One is known in an instant. The First and the Last is in the present. The Light of the world shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out.

Melchior was there. Melchior, could you tell us what you saw when you came to that moment?

Melchior: “Our trade is with the future, as a rule, charting the bright courses, channels, navigations of the distant lighted vessels of the heavens, probing through the viscera of sacrificial beasts, observing birds in flight, relating visions of the night to what will come to pass in days and years ahead.

“This white and mobile star, however, tells us nothing of what is to be, directs the sight instead toward what is. I mean the present, here and now, and what, or better, *who* is born within this tight yet waking moment. The Presence of new life awaits our presence and the precious gifts we too might bear inside the stable of the self.”

Dr. Olds: The Presence of new life awaits our presence. Is that what you said? The Presence of new life awaits our presence. We do not come to God, he comes to us. He is there waiting all along. Thank you, Melchior.

It was an eternal instant. An instant of time that has no time. It was a minute that refused to die after sixty seconds. It was a picture that froze in mid-frame. In an instant, the Creator said, “*Let there be light and there was light.*” In an instant, Moses met God at the burning bush. In an instant, the kings bow at the feet of a small boy by the name of Jesus and encounter the great I Am who really is.

J.B. Phillips, more than fifty years ago, wrote a tiny book entitled Your God is Too Small. In it he said, “A lot of people cannot go deep into their own spiritual lives because their notions of God are too small. They are content to live with a God they can control, get a handle on, figure out. So we box God into our own way of thinking, forgetting the true nature of the great I Am who is among us.”

Jesus said “I am the Messiah,
I am the door,
I am the resurrection,
I am the way, the truth, the life.
I am the light of the world.

When will we let God be God? Not the God of the future but the God of the now—the ever-present God.

NOTHING CHANGES BUT EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT.

Let Balthazar tell you what he saw. You were there. You experienced it. Tell us about what it meant when you left that place that day.

Balthazar: “This star discloses nothing that we have not seen before. A cattle-cave with straw, the stolid beasts, a couple caught in poverty and cruel circumstance, and a child, newborn, with all the customary trappings of exhaustion followed by relief, blood, bandages, and that strangely childlike look of first-time parents. What was it, then, that set this towering within, that moved us, as if gazing from some sudden, dizzy height, to gasp with wonder even as we grasp for something to hold onto? Is every birth attended in this way? Does such a leap lie just beneath the surface of all things and every moment? And, if so, should we have jumped, and can we still?”

Dr. Olds: That’s a good question. Should we have jumped and can we still? That’s the question.

One supposes the Wise Men went home and nothing changed. They went back to watching the stars, caring for their families, living in a community. On the one hand nothing changed, but somewhere deep within everything was different.

When I came back to work after more than two months of medical leave I immediately had to deal with finances and personnel. They happened to be the same two things I was dealing with before I became ill. Some things never change.

As I entered this trial I prayed for some new revelation. I wanted some new insight that might revolutionize my life. To date I have experienced no such epiphany. I only have the message to be faithful, you have touched the bottom and the bottom is sound.

Nothing is changed but everything is different. When you know the bottom is sound, and death has no fear, you are free to live every moment as an eternal instant. Nothing is changed but everything is different. Should we have jumped and can we still? That is the question.

Amen.

