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**Matthew 2:1-12**, Isaiah 60:1-6

## THE QUEST

When you think about it, there is very little we know about the magi who came searching for Jesus. We don't know where they were from—scripture simply tells us they were from “the East.” We don't know for sure what they did, although it is often presumed from their description that they were astrologers, men who studied the skies. And even though tradition tells us there were three magi, we actually don't know for sure how many of them there were because scripture never gives us this detail. Perhaps the tradition of there being three wise men arose from the three gifts they presented to the infant Jesus. Scripture really gives us very little information about these Eastern travelers.

But what *can* be determined from the story is how persistently they searched for Jesus. Clearly their search for Jesus is no casual wandering, no youthful road trip taken for the fun of it. Instead, these men set out on what was a lengthy, and most likely arduous trip, with purpose and determination, in search of the king of the Jews.

We know from the story that their search took them at first to the wrong place. Thinking that a king would naturally be found in high places, they first headed to Jerusalem, to the big city, and began making inquiries about where this new king of the Jews might be found. But the king they sought was not to be found in Jerusalem or in the palace of King Herod, but rather in the small, backwater town of Bethlehem. And once equipped with this new information, the wise men turn in a new direction and take their search to Bethlehem where they ultimately discover the object of their quest—an infant king born to an impoverished couple. And they were overcome with joy.

What motivated these men to undertake such a difficult and lengthy journey? Why would they undertake this journey at all if they didn't have to? We can only imagine that they were motivated by some kind of deep faith, a special calling they felt they had to pay attention to.

The wise men's determined search for Jesus prompts us to consider our own journeys to find Jesus in our lives. As we consider our own lives, what has our quest to find Jesus look like? Maybe the first question we might ask is whether we even undertake a search at all. Do we search for God or do we just go about our ordinary lives and wonder if and when God might show up? We go to work, take care of the kids, fix our meals, clean the house, maintain the car, plan for holidays, and go through all the motions of daily living. But do we approach our faith as a quest? Do we entertain the idea that there is a search we are invited to be a part of? Do we imagine that there is something precious awaiting our discovery if we would but search?

I marvel at the purposeful nature of the magi's search. There was something important, something precious they wanted to find. And they were determined to find it. When have you last felt that kind of intense drive to search for something? There are times when we may have lost something precious and need to find it: a child, a pet, an heirloom. But when have we felt this kind of drive to search for Christ?

There is a misconception that exists among a lot of Christians that faith is something we "have"—as if it were a possession. We *have* faith. Or sometimes we regard faith as a destination we have arrived at. We will declare that we *are* Christians. We've arrived. Listen to the way some people talk. They say, "When I found Jesus," as if it was a one-time event. And while some among us may indeed have had a profound, even life-altering experience with God, it seems to me far more accurate to think of our life of faith as a journey of "finding" Jesus.

Jesus is found in our lives over and over again. And that is because Jesus is a moving target. Just when we think we know who he is, where he is, what he is, he's off somewhere else. For those living in Jesus' day, Jesus was the Messiah, the one who would liberate them. But then this liberator comes to them as a baby, born among the poor and powerless. Jesus taught about what it meant to be faithful to God, but then he could also be found hanging out with sinners and social outcasts. Jesus was the crucified one, but just when they thought he was all dead and buried, up he pops up alive again to proclaim God's victory over the grave. Those Jewish people who followed Jesus after his death and resurrection were very faithful to their tradition. But then had to wrestle with the outrageous idea that Jesus was now inviting Gentiles to become his followers. We think we can find Jesus and hold on to him, but he is always leading us down new pathways, always inviting us to find him somewhere else, always surprising us by where and how he will emerge.

We enter dangerous territory when we think we have found Jesus once and for all. Because then we flirt with extremism. Or we move into the realm of idolatry—worshipping someone of our own creation. The life with Jesus isn't so much an invitation to arrive at some destination or to arrive at a place of certainty, as it is an invitation to take part in the search, to always be seeking his presence, to be open to what he may be teaching us, to discover the new paths where he is leading us.

Those magi found the infant Jesus, the object of their quest, but as they turned and plodded homeward, they faced a new journey altogether. Their new journey would be discovering how Jesus would shape the rest of their lives. Finding Jesus only opens the door to new journeys as we strive to undertake the complicated task of loving one another—even our enemies; or as we endeavor to live justly in a complex world of systemic injustice; or as we try

to teach kindness to our children in a world of bullies; or what it means to offer our allegiance to God even as we live in a materialistic world and secretly hope to win the lottery.

The life of faith is not intended to be a destination but a journey, a search that involves our effort and attention and diligence. There are precious discoveries to be made, discoveries of where the Holy One is to be found in our complicated lives and in our complicated world. But if we are not searching, we may miss them.

What does it look like to search for Jesus? There is no one path. There are many ways we undertake the search. Prayer, and study of Scripture, and coming together in collective worship, and reading, and listening to others, and studying other religions are some ways to search. So too is working for justice, and trying to forgive, and giving away our time, money, and energies. And remaining open, open to new ideas and perspectives, open to how God may be found in the least likely places, and people, and circumstances. What active searching allows us to do is to train our eyes and our ears and our hearts to see God. Like the magi, we are invited to look for God's light and then to follow the light to discover where it leads us.

We heard in our first reading today the prophet Isaiah announcing the coming of God's light. "Arise," he tells us. Notice the imperative. In other words, get up! It is a call to join the quest, to fall in line with the magi and journey to find Christ in our lives. But that is an active pursuit. It takes intentionality. In other words, there is no place for armchair Christians. The life of faith is a determined journey to discover how we can love and live Christ's way.

Some people think that finding Christ and having Christ in their lives will make their lives easier, happier, or safer. Jesus never promises us those things. In fact, he predicts just the opposite. He tells us that the road of discipleship will include our own journeys to the cross, because loving others, forgiving others, working for justice, living simply, caring for the stranger

will never be easy endeavors. So we do not undertake the quest for Jesus in order to find some false sense of security or happiness. We undertake the quest so that our lives will be in alignment with the goodness of God. Those magi were overcome with joy when they discovered the Christ child because they had drawn close to the bright light of God's goodness.

The prophet Isaiah tells us not only to "arise," but also tells us to "shine." The light of God's goodness is supposed to shine from us. We undertake the quest to find Jesus in our lives not only for our own personal sense of meaning but so that we may take the light of God into ourselves. We then become bearers of God's light, living lanterns of God's love for a world sitting in darkness.