

FINDING JESUS

ISAIAH 60:1-6; MATTHEW 2:1-12

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Yesterday, January 6, was the Epiphany of our Lord, the day on which wise men from the east came to pay homage to the infant Jesus.

The festival of Epiphany is the celebration of the first appearance of the Christ Child to the Gentiles—represented by the three kings.

Both Isaiah which we heard Cornelia read and Matthew who quotes from the prophet Micah predict that this birth will be so significant that not just his own people, the Jews, but all people will be drawn to him.

That's where I'd like to begin, with those early predictions from 600 BC of a savior that all the world would be drawn to. Then I'd like to consider what we might learn from those three wise men that applies to 2007.

The theme today is finding Jesus. I'm not sure it is any easier now than it ever was. Certainly, in his own time, even his own disciples regularly missed the point.

They, like perhaps many of us, may have been suffering from the "I'll-be-seeing-you-in-all-the-old-familiar-places" syndrome.

You see, the 'old familiar places' they would have looked for this Messiah were in the precincts of power. The halls of some first century Pentagon or inner sanctum Oval Office. He was to be a world figure not just a tribal chieftain and regional warlord.

The oldest prophecy, Isaiah 60, goes back to the Babylonian exile when the people were living in what is today Iraq. Based on this prophecy many of them hoped and expected to return to a new and powerful Jerusalem from which their nation would be restored to honor.

But when they were allowed to return they found Jerusalem in tatters. Hardly the capital city of a powerful nation. This was when Cyrus was king of Persia. Yet, they never let go of the old dream that one day a conquering military hero would restore their nation to power.

You see when the Messiah finally did come everyone was looking for someone else. The notion that Israel's Messiah would be born in a feeding trough for cattle was so outrageous that many people missed the holy comedy of it. Judas for one. He expected the Messiah to have a chest full of medals from previous campaigns.

Herod for another. Yet, while Herod was willing to accept that Israel's new king could be born of humble circumstances, he could not tolerate the threat to his own limited power base. Herod was enough of a street fighter to know that he had to eliminate any potential competitor no matter how young.

The bible says a dream told the wise men to leave the country by another route and not tell Herod where the infant king could be found. I'll bet his forked tongue and beady eyes had something to do with it too. In the end, everyone seemed to be expecting this long-predicted Messiah to be wearing a general's uniform. Everyone except the three wise men.

We could learn something today from those wise men. They were not laboring under the Jewish expectation of a Messiah as military hero. Yet, every culture and age has been driven by what Henry Kissinger famously dubbed *realpolitik* – power politics.

So the wise men do get some credit for thinking out of the box or looking out of the box, if you will, for a world figure with the power to redeem the human family.

My hunch is they had seen enough of flawed human power and relationships to be willing to look for the messiah anywhere. They didn't need to lay claim to him for their own religion or nationality. They just knew the world needed a messiah and needed one fast.

The other lesson from the wise men is that in addition to searching Scripture as in today's prophecies from Isaiah and Micah, finding Jesus has to do with listening to your heart.

What if they had not taken seriously that dream they had and gone back to Herod and given him the exact coordinates of Jesus location. We wouldn't be here today.

But they were willing to go with their instinct, their hunch, their gut, their conscience, call it what you will, to pay homage to the baby.

Now shift with me to the present. Things haven't changed much. We still look for Jesus in places of worldly power and if not Jesus then we look for the justice and peace and hope that Jesus brings in the places and people that drip with power.

And at its very core I believe this association of power with world salvation is another way we have of saying that when it comes down to it what really matters is the human ability to control life. That is what our old familiar definitions of religion and power are about. Control.

In blunt terms, if we have enough money or title or status, if we have enough weapons we are able to order our own world. The messiah as conquering military hero is about me and my nation retaining control of our destiny and future. You can see it happening right now in Iraq and Palestine and Africa. But we can also see, as those returning exiles saw, that worldly power does not deliver our hearts' deepest longing. And we can also see that sometimes it is not even good for national security.

God in a peasant baby exposes the scandal of our longing to be in charge of life. God in a peasant baby strips us of our illusion that we can find Jesus and also retain our old familiar notions of power and control.

It is why anything that threatens my grip on life leaves me with two choices: either I can let go of the illusion of control; or, I can make my knuckles turn white grabbing onto the very thing I am afraid of losing with such force that I will probably end up squeezing the life out of whatever relationship or dream it is.

Finding Jesus means trusting God's preposterous plan to save the world with a peasant baby then laying before that baby everything that is precious: our families, our careers, our deepest yearnings and aspirations. When that happens we exchange the fiction of our own control for trust in God's loving control; and we are transformed from detached spectators of religion into servants of the Christ.

Unless I miss my guess there are more than a few of us starting out this new year facing some choice like that. Do I let go of my death grip on my plans for my own life, or do I give them to Jesus and see what God has in store for me?

As I think about it the significant changes for the better and sense of life's abundance in my own life came at those moments as a parent or in my ministry when I 'let go' and God revealed some previously unseen path or closed or opened a door I had been unwilling to consider.

I am not saying stop making important decisions I'm saying a new approach might be to start asking God to guide our decision making.

It's something we get the hang of doing. Seeing others helps. Watching the wise men, their persistence and integrity and courage and willingness to be led to unexpected places to find God.

I'll bet our mission group just back from Houma, Louisiana will share some lessons in what it means to look for and find Jesus, not in all the old familiar places, but in households of poverty and communities of despair.

Their week of service was in one of the most forgotten and backwater places in the nation—the Louisiana bayou. A place few people want to be from. Just the kind of place Jesus is likely to show up.

I can't wait to hear their stories about finding Jesus among the poor and broken in Houma.

2007 promises to be a significant year for Westminster. Expanding a far reaching mission on Buffalo's West Side: tutoring, working with Habitat, coaching and mentoring those who long to start or improve a business.

Raising funds to reshape the ministry that goes on in this building and in the Butzer Building by reshaping and upgrading the buildings themselves.

I'll never forget the difference a new bathroom on the third floor of our house made shortly after we moved into it. Multiply that a hundred times and you'll get the difference our capital campaign will make to the education and fellowship ministries that take place at Westminster.

I can't imagine any of it happening unless we get the knack of finding Jesus...by giving up our old definitions of religion and power and laying at his feet what is precious to us—not only our literal treasure but the treasures of our hopes and dreams for ourselves and our families and this congregation.

So come to the table, living like wise men and women: releasing your grip on life, giving control to the One who is in control whether we choose to acknowledge that today or tomorrow. Amen.